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MARLO, THE MERCILESS.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM



GUIDED BY THE SWINGING LIGHTS, THE SCHOONER DASHED THROUGH THE REEF CHANNEL, HEADING FOR AN ANCHORAGE.

Marlo, the Merciless;

OR,
RED RAVEN'S REDSKIN RUSE.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE HAUNTED HACIENDA.

Back from the coast of the Pacific Ocean some fifteen miles, and in the State of California, there stands to-day the ruins of what was once a combination ranch and old Spanish Mission.

Built many generations ago by the Spanish padres, it was as strong as a fort, and had about it within its stone walls all that went to make up a complete home.

The soil had been well tilled; orange and other fruit trees abounded, and the plains to the northward had been covered with grazing cattle in the good old days; the hills were lined with vineyards, and the woods were alive with game, for the worthy old padres, in their isolation, lived luxuriously.

But those they came there to teach, to reclaim from their wild and barbarous life as savages, loved not the palefaces who had invaded their country, even though they had come to reclaim their souls; so one night they swept down upon the Mission in all their might of tomahawk and scalping knife, and the Plaza, the chapel and the abiding places ran red with the crimson tide of life.

The pious nuns, orphan children, and the servants, along with the padres, all shared the same fate at the hands of the implacable redskins, who, after looting the Mission from chapel to kitchen, applied the torch to all that would burn.

The wines had been drunk by the maddened Indians, who then became even more cruel and merciless in their deviltry, until only a ruin and death was left behind.

The bodies lay where they had fallen, for there was no one to bury them, no kind hand to perform the last sad rites, as the massacre had been complete.

For long years the place was studiously avoided, and men began to dread the place as haunted, and weird stories were common of the sights seen there by those who passed near, at night, upon the trails.

A stage-coach line was established, running northward, but the drivers changed their course so as to leave the hacienda far away when bound upon their travel north and south.

So it was that the near-by trails became untraveled, and thus became overgrown with weeds and underbrush, until, in time, the once open path was almost obliterated.

The hacienda became more and more dreaded, and no ranchero would establish a home within many miles of the fatal and uncanny spot.

The cowboys from ranches leagues away never allowed their cattle to stray in the direction of the ruin, and when they did do so, they were never hunted up, but allowed to run wild, until herds of cattle were roaming over the plains, valleys and mountains near the coast, haunting the vicinity of the deserted old Mission, as though they wished to keep up at least one connecting link with man.

After many years the ruin became the abiding-place of a band of mounted robbers, who infested the trails, but these brigands were, at last, hunted down by a bold spirit who came as a stranger in the country.

He bore a Spanish name, yet it was said that he was a Texan, and he brought with him a small but faithful and resolute band of followers, cowboys and servants.

It was claimed by him that he had hanged the robber chief, and those of the band who had not shared their leader's fate were driven away to save their lives.

This stranger at once became most popular throughout the country, and with no dread of haunting spirits paid the taxes upon the Mission land and determined to settle on the estate as a ranchero.

In this he was encouraged by the other ranchmen whose lands were within fifty miles around the Haunted Hacienda, though the ranch residences and corrals were few and far between.

The stranger at once improved one wing of

the hacienda, to make it a comfortable dwelling-place, leaving the rest in ruins. His cowboys corralled the wild horses and cattle on the range and began to herd them and tame their wild nature.

But the Haunted Hacienda had not been very long the home of Señor Marco Fuentes, for such was his name, before it was discovered that the outlaw band had not been driven from the trails, for the ranches and small settlements were raided now and then, and the coaches on the trails were held up and robbed with provoking regularity.

These outlaws of the trails were known as the Gold Ghouls, and in vain had their retreats been sought—in vain all efforts to capture them made by the united cowboys of the country, for leagues around, led by common consent by Señor Fuentes, the ranchero of the Haunted Hacienda, as chief.

Such the situation at the time this romance opens, and the Haunted Hacienda becomes the center of incident and action of this tale, in which there is more truth than fiction.

CHAPTER II.

THE CONFESSION.

A STRANGE scene was being enacted in the Haunted Hacienda.

A party of sailors, landing from a Government vessel which had found a secure basin where it could anchor in safety, and without fear of being discovered, had made their way inland, and by night had surrounded the old Mission ranch.

It was said by the two servants there—Carlos, a tall handsome Mexican, and El Cinto his wife, a woman of strange beauty of face and form for one in her menial position in life—that the ranchero was absent from home and yet was expected back very soon; so the band of sailors divided, one party marching away in the darkness to a distant ranch, the home of a wealthy Californian, Señor Samos by name, and the others remaining in the hacienda to await the return of the master.

The one who called himself "master" returned, and was accompanied by a band of Indian warriors under their own chief, the Red Raven.

This same band of Indians had been serving as the cowboys of the hacienda for some months, and were known as the Redskin Ropers.

They returned to the Haunted Hacienda to find themselves entrapped and held under the guns of the sailors.

Then the story of the chief, Red Raven, was heard, and listened to with surprise by the captors:

"I am," he said, "known as Red Raven, chief of the Redskin Ropers, but I am no Indian; I am a white man; in truth I am none other than Señor Marco Fuentes, the former owner of this ranch.

"I was taken from here to be put to death by one who came to my home in the guise of a priest, seeking shelter under the plea of illness, and who was cared for most kindly by me.

"In return, he entered my room by night, made me prisoner, and, taking me to the home of Señor Samos, turned me over to his herdsmen to be put to death, claiming that I was the chief of the Gold Ghouls.

"By bribery I escaped being hanged; a grave was dug and filled in again, and it was claimed that I was buried there.

"A fugitive from my own home, I sought safety among the redskins, and set to work to train those now with me to serve me well in my purpose of revenge and reclamation.

"This pretended padre returned to this hacienda, told my people that I had been hanged, and claiming to be my friend, said that he had purchased from me the ranch, and all connected with it, and would dwell here as ranchero himself.

"I discovered that he was none other than a fugitive sailor from the Point Desolation settlement up the coast—that he was a smuggler and outlaw, and that his vessel had been wrecked on those shores.

"He had, while seeking a place of refuge, saved the Señorita Samos from a band of outlaws who would have kidnapped her, and then he vowed to hunt down these lawless men.

"Thus it was, to gain favor with Señor and Señorita Samos, that he came here and made me his victim.

"But, when at length I was ready to strike a blow for my revenge, I came here with my Redskin Ropers and secured service under him.

"Thus it was that I discovered that he in reality was the Gold Ghoul chief, and he has now come back with his Redskin Ropers from

a hunt after gold upon the trails, for he sought to make robbers of us all.

"So I tell you, señor, that I am the ranchero, Marco Fuentes, the real owner of this hacienda, and this man, who is none other than Marlo the Merciless, is the one you seek—the real outlaw, the robber chief.

"As the master here, one who has been so cruelly treated by the man he trusted, I bid you welcome, and as soon as I can make a change in my costume, appearing as my proper self, and no longer as Red Raven, the Chief of the Red Ropers, I will join you as your host."

This confession of the Señor Fuentes was listened to by his captors with feelings of surprise and sympathy, and they felt that he had been a deeply wronged man.

The one who had done him this great injury was their prisoner, and his name, as Marlo the Merciless Marauder, had spread through the land, though no one knew him as the pretended owner of the ranch, which he assumed he had purchased from the man he had sent, as he supposed, to his death at the rope's end.

A silence fell upon all after the departure of the Señor Fuentes to change his toilet, which was broken at last by the startling words:

"That man will never return, for well he knows that Señor Samos and his daughter are aware that he was an outlaw, the real and only leader of the Gold Ghouls.

"The Señorita Samos knows him to be the man who kidnapped her in the ruined Mission on the coast, and that he proclaimed himself to her as the captain of the Gold Ghouls.

"You have me safe in your power, and I deny nothing that he has said against me, for I am Marlo the Merciless, the outlaw ranchero; but you have allowed the real leader of the robber band to escape, for never will he return."

"But he will; he must! Ho, men! Search this old pile of stones and unearth that man!" cried the officer in charge of the sailor guard.

"Search if you will, but you will search in vain, for that man will never be taken, as there are secret dungeons and passages here that he alone knows of, and by which he can escape," cried Marlo.

And, search indeed in vain the sailors did, for Señor Fuentes did not return as he had promised, and he was not found after most diligent search.

At last the sailors marched back to their ship, with Marlo a prisoner, for each one of the Redskin Ropers had disappeared as mysteriously as had their white chief, Red Raven, who his captors now knew was none other than the ranchero, Fuentes.

CHAPTER III.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT.

THE party of sailors who had gone to the Samos hacienda, under suspicion that the outlaw ranchero, Señor Fuentes, would return to his retreat in the Haunted Ranch by that trail, was under the command of a dashing young officer of the revenue service.

He was a man of distinguished bearing, and had passed his thirty-fifth year.

Possessed of wealth, he had entered the sea service from a spirit of adventure, and had risen to the command of the Pacific revenue cutter that protected the coast about San Francisco.

As he had learned from a young skipper of the coaster settlement at Point Desolation, that there was a chance to run to earth the smuggler and mountain robber, Marlo the Merciless, he would not go with the detachment as an officer, to take honor of victory from the youth and his crew, but did go as an ally and friend, stripping himself of his shoulder-straps to do so.

Such was Captain Edgar Yerger, and he it was who had led the party of the coaster crew to the Samos Ranch.

Señor Samos was a man of refinement and of aristocratic family as well as of large wealth.

Though the descendant of a Spanish Don, he claimed, on his maternal side, to be an American; and had wedded a fair daughter of the United States.

His wife had died leaving him an only child, Lulita, the maiden whom the Gold Ghoul chief, Fuentes, passing as a ranchero, but really the Gold Ghoul chief—had sought to kidnap, as he could not win her love in a manly way.

The hacienda of Señor Samos was like a castle, so large and strong was it, and it was filled with every luxury which heart could desire.

Not a wish of the beautiful young mistress of the domain went ungratified, for she was the idol of her father's life.

The hacienda was grandly furnished; there were servants by the score; the stables were

filled with fine horses; orchards, orangeries, vineyards and gardens full of vegetables were in the rear of the hacienda, while the front was a beautiful flower garden, with a Park of fine old trees near.

A fine view from the hill-top, upon which it was situated, could be had for leagues around, with the Pacific Ocean far to the westward, and the mountains to the eastward, while plains and valleys lay between.

Such was the home which Fuentes had sought to gain possession of by forcing Lulita Samos into a marriage with him.

It was to this home that Captain Edgar Yerger and his band of coasters made their way after leaving the Haunted Hacienda.

The sun had risen over the mountain-tops ere they drew near the white-walled home. The father and daughter were enjoying the scene from the piazza, and of which they never tired, when the sailors came in sight.

The señor was surprised and said:

"Señor Marlo, our new neighbor of the old Mission, must have returned, my child, from his trip northward, for who else can they be?"

"They come from the direction of the señor's home, father, but they have not the look of ranchmen," replied Lulita, who was a maiden of wondrous beauty of face and of exquisite form—a face which to behold was to love, so full was it of high-bred refinement and purity of character.

The two watched the approaching party, and as they entered the plaza Señor Samos advanced to meet the one who came forward ahead of his men.

"The Señor Samos, I presume?" said the visitor in perfect Spanish.

"Yes, señor, but as I see that you are, like myself, an American, we can converse in English."

"Tell me, please, whom I have the honor of welcoming to my home?"

The manner of the Señor Samos was courtly in the extreme and quite won his visitor, who replied:

"I am Edgar Yerger, captain of the United States revenue cutter *Rush*, when I am on duty, sir; but at present I am acting as an ally to a young coaster friend of mine who came to your neighborhood to hunt down a band of outlaws under a chief known as Marlo the Merciless."

Both the Señor Samos and Lulita started at the name given by the officer, and the former said:

"Permit me, Captain Yerger, to present you to my daughter, the Señorita Lulita Samos, and then we will hear what you have to say of the outlaw hunting expedition after you have joined us at breakfast, which meal we have not yet partaken of."

If Lulita had started at the name Marlo, so did Captain Yerger as he gazed at the beautiful girl before him.

Never before had he looked upon such a vision of perfect loveliness!

Her greeting of him was cordial, and she joined her father in the invitation to breakfast, while she added:

"Your men shall also be well cared for, Captain Yerger."

"I did not expect to quarter my men and myself upon your hospitality, Señor Samos, and yet I cannot, for myself, and for them, refuse your very kind invitation, seconded as it is by the Señorita Samos."

"I am glad to hear you say this, Captain Yerger. A servant shall at once show you to a room to refresh yourself after what I believe has been a night march."

"It has, Señor Samos," replied the officer, and he followed a servant to a chamber where he could make his toilet.

"Well! I am in love and at first sight—yes, in love! That is the one woman I have ever seen to win my heart!" he ejaculated warmly, as the servant left him alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER IV.

A BROKEN DREAM.

THE natural vanity of man caused Captain Yerger to regret that he was not wearing his handsome uniform, that he might make a more favorable impression upon the lovely Señorita Lulita.

As it was he was dressed in a blue sailor suit, bearing no insignia of rank, or of gold lace upon it.

He was met by Señor Samos, and escorted to the breakfast-room, where Lulita again gave him courteous welcome.

He noted that the surroundings were refined and elegant, the breakfast service was of solid silver, and the servants perfectly trained, while the meal was enough to tempt any palate.

Señor Samos did not allude to the purpose of the captain's coming, and Lulita made herself most agreeable, though he perceived that she was anxious about something; and that something was the fact that the outlaw chief, Marlo, had saved Lulita from being kidnapped by Fuentes, and that he had then played the part of an honorable ranchero; and being a handsome, fascinating fellow, was it not possible that he had won the heart of the fair maiden, who little dreamed how black was his heart, and that he was outlaw, smuggler, mountain robber and fugitive from justice?

She had found the Señor Fuentes to be an impostor, the secret leader of outlaws, and it was to her a startling statement that his successor at the Haunted Hacienda was, likewise, a man of crimes.

Had this Lucifer, Marlo, really won the love of Lulita Samos?

Such were the thoughts flashing through the mind of Captain Yerger as he regarded the beautiful girl, and he felt a keen pang of dread lest such was the case, and if so, a new motive for the arrest and exposure of the audacious outlaw.

At last the Señor Samos led the way to the library, and begged Captain Yerger, while smoking their cigars, to make known his mission to their neighborhood.

"Perhaps the Señorita Samos may not wish to hear the ugly story I have to tell!"

"I prefer to hear it, if the señor does not desire that I should not," Lulita answered, unhesitatingly.

"I will be glad if the Señorita Samos will listen," was the earnest reply.

At this Lulita arose and took a seat in the shadows of the curtained window, where her face would not be so plainly visible, and at the request of the Señor Samos, Captain Yerger began his story.

"To explain the situation fully, I must tell you," began the officer, "that there is a settlement of coasters far up the coast from here, on Point Desolation."

"I have heard of these strange people," assured the ranchero.

"They are a strange people, señor, being half sailors, half mountaineers."

"They have their homes on Point Desolation, a good harbor for their swift-sailing boats, and part of the year they are fishermen and coast-traders, while the other part is spent at their ranches back in the range, where they have great numbers of cattle, horses and sheep."

"At first it was supposed that they were smugglers, perhaps wreckers, and even buccaneers, but I discovered my mistake as to this, in chasing ashore a craft which I found was indeed engaged in smuggling, and commanded by one, Marlo, who was one of these very people."

"He had his own crew with him, fought us hard to escape capture, and escaped with all but his dead and wounded, after running his vessel ashore."

"I at once determined to seek him out in the Point Desolation settlement; but it was some time before I could go there, and after running in to an anchorage with my cutter, to my surprise I found, in the wife of the Coaster Chief, none other than my own sister, whom I had looked upon as dead for long years, as it was supposed that she had been lost in a storm on the river flowing by our home in New York."

"But no; she had clung faithfully to the man she had loved, despite the charges against him of crime, even of murder, and had fled with him to become his wife, and in the remote settlement of Point Desolation they had sought a refuge and had there dwelt ever since."

"She gave me conclusive proof of her husband's innocence of the crimes with which he was charged, and told me that he was then away in chase of this very smuggler captain, Marlo, while in another craft, also pursuing Marlo, was an adopted son, Ralph, with her own little daughter."

"This youth, Ralph, she explained, had been cast ashore upon the coast, and they had adopted him, and a noble fellow he had proven himself, while her daughter Pearl, of fourteen, in a spirit of daring adventure, had run off with her brother in the chase after Marlo, who had, by his acts of lawlessness, sought to bring disgrace upon their community."

"After all this interesting and important information, I gave chase in the cutter and coming up with the pursuers found that Marlo's craft had been struck by lightning in a storm, and all were supposed to have been killed, for the hull drove ashore, and the bodies found were buried by this youth, Ralph."

"Back to the settlement, then, we all went, and I there reported the smuggler as dead."

"When, at their usual season, the Coaster Chief and his family went up to their ranch in the range, they were attacked by night by a band of outlaws whom Ralph discovered, from one of the band whom he had once befriended, was led by none other than Marlo, the Cowboy Smuggler."

Again it was supposed that Marlo had been killed, but Ralph decided, acting upon what had been told him, to come to their neighborhood and see if the would-be brigand really was dead.

"Need I tell you that he found in the ranchero of the Haunted Hacienda, known as Señor Julius Marlowe, none other than Marlo the outlaw?"

With this astonishing announcement by Captain Yerger came a moan from the lips of Lulita Samos and she fell upon the floor in a swoon.

CHAPTER V.

THE STRICKEN HEART.

THE sudden swooning of Lulita Samos was a surprise and a shock to her father, and also to Captain Yerger.

They sprung forward, and, raising her from the floor, placed her upon a divan, when Señor Samos hastily summoned the old nurse of his daughter and sought restoratives to bring her back to consciousness.

The experience of Captain Yerger here came in well, and in a short while Lulita was able to rise. Then, escorted by her father and Edwina, the nurse, she sought her own room.

Instead of going to bed, as her father urged, she said:

"No; I am not ill now, and I only wish to be alone; I wish to think."

Her father returned to the library, after motioning for the nurse to remain; but when he saw that she was not alone, the young lady said with strange sternness for her:

"Edwina, you, too, must go. I must be left alone."

"But, señorita, dear, I—"

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes, señorita, but—"

"Leave me!" and Lulita gave a stamp with her little foot that was imperative.

The nurse sighed and left, but remained without the door.

Left to herself, the young girl began to pace to and fro, wringing her hands nervously together.

After a while she became more calm, and mused aloud as she continued her steady pace.

"How strange all this is," she murmured. "Señor Fuentes first crossed my path, a handsome man, and strangely fascinating."

"He had the claim upon me of having saved me from capture by outlaws, and I was strangely drawn toward him until I compared him with my noble father. Then I saw that he was not the man of honor I could admire and love."

"I felt that he possessed a false heart, whatever he might profess openly."

"Then, when he became aware of my distrust and dislike, he showed the villain that he was, for he sought to kidnap me, to force me to become his wife."

"He told me, then, that his rescue of me was a fraud—that he had planned the affair with his own men—that he was the chief of the dreaded Gold Ghouls."

"Then I was rescued from him by this man against whom I have just heard such charges of crime."

"I believed that, in him, I had found a true and noble man."

"He undertook the capture of this outlaw, Fuentes, and then he, too, became a neighbor, honored by my father, his home being the Haunted Hacienda which he said he had purchased from Fuentes, pledging himself to send the purchase-money to one whose name was given him by the doomed man."

"Now this gallant officer crosses my path, and tells me that Señor Julius Marlowe, as we knew him, is Marlo, the Merciless Marauder, the outlaw, the smuggler, the land-pirate!"

"He tells me that, as one in authority, he has come here to capture Marlo as a fugitive from justice."

"He arrives just in time to save me, for—to my own shame I confess it—I was becoming strangely interested in this second outlaw chief who has been my friend, my lover."

"It is a severe ordeal for me, yet one I must bravely endure. I owe my escape to this officer."

He surely has saved me from a life of shame—of misery untold.

"No, not that alone, but from death, for when it came to me that I was the wife of an outlaw, all that is good in me would have asserted itself, and with my own hand would I have taken my life.

"Thank Heaven that I had not really learned to love that evil man as I am capable of loving.

"Thank Heaven that I found in him a blemish, I know not what, which checked my budding affection, and kept me from bestowing upon him my heart and hand.

"But I am hurt, my heart is wounded, I must frankly admit, for he was dear enough to me to make me suffer when he was proven to be so vile and dishonorable.

"I am myself now again, and I will seek my father and his guest in the library and learn more of this man upon whom I so nearly sacrificed myself. Yes, I will go at once."

With this she opened the door, to find old Edwina there awaiting her call.

"Ah, good Edwina, I might have known that I could not drive you far from me. But do not worry about me. I am well now.

"See, I can even smile, and I am going to join my father and his guest in the library.

"It was all about something I will tell you of to-night, Edwina.

"It was because I am a woman, a poor, weak girl, and I was hit a hard blow, just here in my heart.

"But it is over now, and I will be worthy of my name, and my brave, noble father."

With this she patted the old nurse affectionately upon the head and was going on, when Edwina said:

"Ah, señorita, you would not go before the strange gentleman as you are. See, your hair is wet from the cologne, and rumpled, and your collar is—"

"Ah! I had not thought of myself. I must ask your aid, Edwina, in making myself more presentable," and the weakness of the woman again showing itself, though diverted into a different channel, Lulita returned to her room and made a very careful toilet before she went again to the library to face the handsome stranger "who had seemed so full of sympathy for her," as the old nurse expressed it.

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN YERGER'S REVELATIONS.

WHEN Lulita drew near the door of the library, she paused.

She heard the voice of their guest, and his words reached her ears:

"No power can save that man, Señor Samos, if I am to have any influence toward bringing punishment upon him, for, to waive his other crimes, the one of trying to win the heart of your lovely daughter, to wreck her life by uniting it to such as he is proven to be, would alone deserve death at the rope's end."

As Lulita heard every word, her face flushed and paled by turns. For a moment she feared she was about to swoon away again; but, with an effort, she controlled herself, and suddenly swept into the library.

Both her father and Captain Yerger sprung to their feet in amazement, and Señor Samos cried:

"My dear child! Why have you come here again?"

The captain bowed low and spoke quickly: "I am glad that Miss Samos feels so little indisposition from her attack of vertigo."

The words were well chosen, but she knew that they were uttered to save her embarrassment.

At once she advanced, and, offering her hand, said in a low but firm tone:

"Señor Captain Yerger, I thank you, but it was no attack of vertigo. I fainted.

"It was, I am going to frankly confess to you, caused by an overwhelming sense of sorrow, of terror, of regret that I had allowed myself to become interested in one who was so utterly unworthy the regard of a self-respecting woman.

"That man, Marlo, the Merciless Marauder, as I now know him to be, I found in an old abandoned Mission on the coast. There he saved me from Señor Fuentes, one whom I also once regarded as a friend, at least.

"Both were false of heart and evil in their lives, but as the one, Marlo, saved me from the other, Fuentes, I learned to regard him with kindness, and almost affection.

"But for you, it might some day have ripened into love; and now I have to thank

you, from my inmost soul, for saving me from disgrace, from misery untold, from death, for to have loved that man would have caused me to set my soul free with my own hand.

"Now, Señor Yerger, I have made my frank confession, and I can never forget what I owe to you."

The words had fallen unhesitatingly, with no sign of embarrassment after the first few had been spoken, and she looked the noble, true maiden she was.

She clasped the hand of the officer as she spoke, and then turned away and glided to her seat, when, in a voice wholly changed, she said, with an air of calm indifference:

"Now, Captain Yerger, tell us more, please, of this crime-stained man, Marlo the Merciless."

Captain Yerger could have cheered her then and there for her splendid exhibition of nerve. He was positively charmed with her, and replied:

"I have just told your father, señorita, all that I have to tell to him, and when I am gone he will perhaps make it known to you."

"Oh, no; tell me, please, yourself, for I know my good father will not mind hearing the story a second time.

"It will do us good, so that we will be careful not again to entertain a wolf in sheep's clothing."

Thus urged, Captain Yerger told of the run down the coast from Point Desolation—of the Coasters under their young skipper, Ralph, the adopted son of their chief—of how he, Yerger, had joined them in the expedition as an ally, coming to the Samos hacienda with one party, while the other held the Haunted Hacienda under surveillance.

All that he knew of Marlo was made known, and then the officer concluded, and his words brought the color to the face of Lulita.

"As I was told the man visited you here, and might return this way, I came hither to capture him, and thus impose upon your hospitality, Señor Samos."

Captain Yerger was made to feel that his men and himself were welcome, and was asked to make himself perfectly at home—a thing it was very easy to do in such luxurious quarters, with Señor Samos and Lulita as his entertainers.

The next day the party came from the Haunted Hacienda, marching back to their vessel by way of the Samos Ranch, and Ralph, the young Coaster, was cordially welcomed by the señor and his daughter during his short stay there.

His stay was long enough to report the return to the Haunted Hacienda of the Redskin Ropers, led by their chief and Marlo, and their quick capture by the sailors.

What had followed was also related, and how Fuentes, not then suspected of being an outlaw, had coolly and calmly made his escape.

"Well, let him go, for he will not dare return here now, and we have nothing to fear from him," said Señor Samos.

"But, the Redskin Ropers, Ralph?" asked Captain Yerger, in a tone of anxiety.

"They had done no wrong, sir, that I could see, so I set them free, to return to their own people."

"I hope they will go," muttered the captain, and then he asked:

"And the ranch?"

"I left in charge of the man Carlos, and his wife, for they seemed ignorant of Marlo's real character, and horrified at discovering him to be what he was in reality."

"Well, I only hope you, Señor Samos, will keep an eye on the place, for I should not be at all surprised should this man Fuentes return to his old deeds of outlawry," remarked the revenue officer.

Soon after the march for the coast was begun, with Marlo their prisoner in double irons, to be taken back to Point Desolation and there be tried by his own people, the Coasters, whom he had so dishonored and compromised.

CHAPTER VII.

"HELP, HELP, OR I PERISH!"

If the Haunted Hacienda held terrors for others, it certainly did not impress with its weird history the two whom the Coasters left there in charge, after the capture of the ranchero outlaw.

These two were the handsome Mexican, Carlos, and his pretty wife, El Cinto, also of the same nationality.

There was a history hanging over these two, and a strange one it was.

The former head servant of Señor Fuentes had been a man by the name of Juan, a villainous-faced fellow of forty-five, who, though always cringing to a superior, was a brute toward an inferior.

He had brought with him a young and beautiful wife, this same El Cinto, and she had been as a slave to him.

It was the old story of having a young and handsome lover, and being forced to wed another, believing that the one she loved was dead.

Long after she found out, when her husband was forced to hide from the officers of the law, that he had endeavored to get rid of her lover by having him put out of the way; but, suddenly, upon the ranch of the Haunted Hacienda, this lover had appeared, and, unknown to Juan as he was, he had become the chief of cowboys for Fuentes.

Then, when Marlo had gotten rid of Juan, the faithful ally of Fuentes, by telling the herders that he had been the one to betray his master, Carlos had stepped into the place with the new outlaw ranchero which Juan had held with the other.

Widowed thus, by Juan's death, El Cinto had ridden with Carlos to the nearest padre and become his wife, letting her hatred for her former husband go down with him into the grave.

It was these two, Carlos and El Cinto, whom the young Coaster Captain had believed innocent of any knowledge of what Marlo really was, and they had been told to remain in the hacienda, as no one would doubtless ever come to disturb them in their possession of the place, or its great herds.

They saw the sailors, mounted upon horses they had taken from the ranch droves, ride away, with Captain Marlo in their midst, and until the party disappeared in the distance they never uttered a word, but stood gazing after them with commingling emotions filling their hearts.

At last, when the party had wholly disappeared from view, Carlos turned to his wife and said in a low voice:

"A narrow escape for us, El Cinto!"

"Yes, very, very narrow indeed, Carlos."

"They tracked Señor Marlo to his doom."

"Yes, and it seems he was a very wicked man; but who would have ever suspected Señor Fuentes of being alive and so cleverly playing the part of an Indian chief?"

"I knew him, El Cinto, for he made himself known to me from the first; but I was sworn to secrecy, and could not even breathe to you the secret, by such vows was I held."

"Then I understand now several things that appeared mysterious to me before, Carlos; but tell me, where has Señor Fuentes gone?"

"He made his escape by one of the secret outlets of the hacienda, and I suppose will never now dare return."

"Then the hacienda will be as our own, Carlos?"

"Yes; we will be master and mistress here, for we are now in full charge. I must at once engage some herders to look after the cattle, for there are more than I can well manage alone. Three cowboys will be enough. A greater number might bring suspicion upon us of having a den of outlaws here."

"Very true; but do you not fear that Fuentes may return?"

"I think not, for now he will have no outlaw band to help him, and with his hopes crushed, as far as the Señorita Samos is concerned, for she knows him now in his true colors, he will have no reason for staying here."

"Suppose he should return, or even now be lying hidden in the hacienda, for you know it is full of secret hiding-places?"

"Well, should he return, then he is master here, that is all, for if he be a robber, El Cinto, we are not to rob him of what is justly his own, outlaw though he be."

"I am glad to hear you speak thus, Carlos, for it tells me that you at least have not been demoralized by your corrupt surroundings."

"But, hark! did you hear that sound?"

"No; what was it?"

"Like a human voice calling."

"It was but the lowing of the cattle."

"No; it was a human voice—hark again!"

They listened in deep silence, and there distinctly came to their ears the sound of a voice calling:

"Ho, Carlos! El Cinto, ho!"

"Help! Help!"

"It is Señor Fuentes's voice," cried El Cinto, and the two started toward the uninhabited wing of the hacienda.

Guided by the voice, now calling loudly for

help, they went from the occupied wing toward the ruined chapel, and Carlos shouted:

"Ho! who calls?"

"It is I, good Carlos—I, Señor Fuentes!"

"Ay, ay, señor! But, where are you?"

"I am in the chapel dungeon, where I came by the narrow passage between the walls."

"The stone doors closed upon me, and this grating, above my head, is the only light and air I have."

"If you do not save me, I am doomed, for I cannot live long in this fearful place."

"Save me, good Carlos, for the love of God!" and the voice of the man was now piteous to hear.

Carlos turned and looked at his beautiful wife for an instant, and then said in a hoarse, quivering voice:

"I know where his treasure is hidden, and his death would give us the ranch, the cattle, the horses and all—"

"Great God! what a temptation, El Cinto, to let him die down there in that dungeon!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BURIED ALIVE.

WHEN Fuentes, in the garb of an Indian chief, after his denunciation of his hated foe, Marlo, left the presence of his sailor captors, he did so with an intention to escape.

He well knew that he, too, would be denounced, and, if a prisoner, his fate would perhaps be the same as that visited upon Marlo.

He had his revenge upon his enemy by seeing him in the power of those who would be as merciless to him as he had been to others, so he must look out for his own safety.

Having had the satisfaction of making Marlo feel this revenge, having him understand that his intended victim was not dead, but had lived to thwart him, Fuentes then had but one purpose, and that was to save himself.

So it was that he had so cleverly made his exit, and seeking the corridor had, through a secret door, made his entrance into a narrow passage between the walls.

In the old ruin he had come across, one day, the original plans of the structure. Every secret room, hallway, closet and dungeon was traced thereon with full descriptions of entrances and exits.

He had spent many an hour in looking up these secrets of the building, and now his knowledge was to serve him well.

Along the narrow passage he went. Not having had time to secure a lantern, he was in total darkness.

He knew that narrow steps were at the end of the passageway, and when he found them, he descended to a dungeon, which he was aware was immediately beneath the chapel, then in ruins.

It ran out under one wing of this ruin, while a grating above in the wall, let in a thin stream of light and air.

The place was dark, but for this ray of light, and as loathsome as a tomb.

But, he heard the sound of steps in the plaza; voices reached his ears, and he knew that his greatly-angered foes were still there and searching for him.

Night came, but still he lingered where that stream of light and air penetrated to the gloomy passage.

He could sleep but little, and was hungry and wretched enough.

At last the night passed and the light of day again streamed down into the dismal hiding-place.

He feared at first that he had reached there in safety only to perish, in an awful way, for he had ascertained that the secret stone which served as a door, could never be opened from within.

When this fear first impressed him he made his way back through the darkness, feeling along the walls until he came to the opening. Then creeping up the steps, he passed along the narrow way between the walls until he reached the end and then solid masonry confronted him. In vain he sought the secret door; it was not there! Nothing but the inflexible solid granite!

He would have called for help, but loud voices without, though barely heard within, told him that his foes had not yet departed, and were eager for his blood.

Back he made his way down the steps, into the dungeon at the end, once more.

Down through the grating overhead the sunlight filtered, revealing his tall form still in its Indian costume, and his face showing haggard through its war-paint.

As he heard no voices now, he concluded that

the hacienda had been deserted by the sailors. What if they had taken away with them as prisoners all the servants—all the retainers and thus had left the place tenantless?

Indeed, it was probable they had done so, and that the uncanny spot was again left to its ghostly—ghastly reputation.

This thought might well alarm him, for, if none were there to hear his call he was doomed—doomed to death by starvation!

Horrible thought!

And in his fear of such a fate he could but cry out—hoping that some straggler had remained and would hear.

It was this wild cry of his that had caught the keen ears of El Cinto, and when it was repeated she and her husband had sought to find what it meant, whose voice it was they had heard.

Led by the cry they had gone to the grating and listened.

Then it was that Carlos, knowing that Fuentes was indeed a doomed man if he did not save him—that all hope was gone for the entombed outlaw, did he and his wife turn their backs upon him—had uttered the words:

"Great God! El Cinto; what a temptation to let him die in that dungeon!"

If it was a terrible temptation to Carlos, for the moment—the wealth that would come to him by the death of Fuentes—it was only for the moment—only until he looked into the large, wondering eyes of his wife.

Then, from her lips came the earnest words:

"No, no, Carlos! You cannot, do not mean it, my husband!"

"Not I, my sweet wife, not I! It was but a man's weakness, a hideous temptation that swept over me; but it is gone, El Cinto, it is gone!"

"You will save me, Carlos, and not permit me to die here!"

The voice came pleadingly out of the dungeon, in tones of evident fear and anguish.

"Yes, indeed, señor, we will save you—El Cinto and I—and we are arranging a plan," cried the man, in hearty answer.

The woman gave him a look that repaid him for the good purpose that now incited her husband.

"We must cut out these iron bars, El Cinto, and lower a rope, for I know of no other way to save him."

"It is the only way, Carlos," was the answer, and the woman hastened away for the necessary implements to carry out the work.

The necessary tools were soon found, and after an hour's work the heavy stones around the grating were so loosened that the iron bars freed and bent upward. A lariat was then lowered and a voice from below soon called out, cheerily:

"Haul away!"

Carlos seized the lariat, and his great strength, aided by that of El Cinto, drew the outlaw ranchero out of the dungeon up to the open space, into the free, pure air!

The outstretched hands of Fuentes grasped the hands of Carlos and the woman, but his words of gratitude found no utterance, for he sunk at their feet, insensible, overcome by the terrible stress of his feelings—by his unexpected escape from a horrible, lingering death!

CHAPTER IX.

THE FUGITIVE RANCHERO.

THE tax upon the nerves of Fuentes, by all he had passed through, had been so terrible that nature had yielded under the strain.

He had been rejected by the Señorita Samos—thwarted in his attempt to kidnap her—had been captured in his own home by her rescuer, the detested Marlo—had been sent forth to be hanged—had escaped, and, reforming his Indian body-guard, had a full revenge in his hands, where he could kill his enemy, get back his ranch and property and again have Lulita in his power, when, suddenly, he found himself in a dungeon from which there would have been no escape unless Carlos and El Cinto were within call.

No wonder the strong man had been overcome by the reaction following his rescue.

Borne by the faithful retainers to his own quarters, he was there made as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances, and regained consciousness to find the rescuers bending over him in fear and anxiety.

When he realized all—that he was once more safe and free to act, his old spirit of revenge at once asserted itself, and after a few moments of reflection he ordered Carlos to mount a horse and ride at full speed after the Indian herders, and to bring them back to the hacienda.

"I had thought, señor, of going to the Mexican herders' camps, below the border line, and getting what men we needed," urged Carlos.

"No; I want the Redskin Ropers, for they know me, as I do them, and they are just what I need in this emergency."

"You, Carlos, are to be the nominal ranchero here—the owner of the ranch, as it were—though I am to be here, or near at hand, for I shall remain out of sight, and Fuentes is no longer to be known as master of the Haunted Hacienda."

"So go at once and overtake the Redskin Ropers, and once they are here you can seek the Mexican cowboys, if we find their aid or presence necessary."

"Don't delay, Carlos, for I fear I am going to be ill."

"But, should any one return here, señor, and find you—what then?"

"El Cinto will see that I am not caught like a rat in a trap, Carlos."

"There are too many secure hiding-places in this old barracks for me to be caught; but, I will not try the chapel dungeon again," and Fuentes shuddered at the recollection of his incarceration there.

Thus urged, Carlos at once went to the stables and selected two of the fleetest and most enduring horses there.

When a long and rapid ride was to be made, the rider changed from one animal to the other every few miles, thus giving each a rest from his burden.

The courier also took food with him, and, after a few words with El Cinto, was off like a rocket, the led horse running easily by his side.

The outlaw ranchero was right about his being ill, for soon a fever made itself felt, and it so increased that, toward night, he grew delirious.

El Cinto did all she could for him and then sat down to keep her lonely vigil.

And lonely it was in that weird place, haunted by so many tragic deeds and memories—weird enough to make the honest man ill at ease; but the woman did not flinch from her task, and did all she could to soothe the fever-racked ranchero.

Strange things she heard in his ravings, of deeds done in the past, which she quickly decided not to forget, and thus minded, she took pencil and paper and made note of acts and names as they fell from the man's lips.

Dawn came at last, and the woman, who scarce seemed to know what fatigue was, found that her patient was asleep and his fever was no higher.

"It may be that he will die, and if he does then Carlos will be master here through no sinful act of his own."

"But I will do all in my power for him, will attend him as tenderly as I would a child, and even hope for his recovery, for I wish no sin on another's life to rest upon my conscience."

"It might be better if he should die, for some one, perhaps innocent and good, would be spared sorrow and suffering; but if Heaven wills it that he should recover so let it be!"

So mused the woman as she attended to her duties in the sick-room.

She also went to the tower and scanned the surrounding country, for she did not wish to be surprised by any one, and Fuentes thus be found and recaptured.

She arranged all so that if there was any one approaching she could lead her patient to a secret retreat near the room, and thus have all appear as though she alone were there.

But, no one would or could enter by the outgate without aid from her, unless they came with ladders to scale the high walls, or a cannon to batter down the gateway, so she felt quite secure, though all alone with a man in delirium.

The day passed, and soon after nightfall was heard the well-known signal of Carlos, without the gate.

El Cinto immediately proceeded to let him in and found that the Redskin Ropers were with him. The cavalcade all passed at once within the walls and camped in the little park of the old Mission, where there was a spring of flowing water and plentiful space for all.

"How is the chief, El Cinto?" was the eager question of Carlos.

"He has been delirious with fever, but is better."

"The Redskin Ropers returned without trouble?"

"Yes; they were glad to do so, for the Señor Fuentes has a strong, strange influence over them."

"Which he will use for evil, I am sure," was El Cinto's low response, as she led the way to the invalid's room.

CHAPTER X.

A MISSION OF MYSTERY.

THE morning sun arose upon a strange scene in the little woodland within the walls of the Haunted Hacienda.

There were encamped the Redskin Ropers, as the Indian allies of Fuentes were usually christened.

They were twenty in number, and a bold, dashing set of redmen.

Tall, all of them six feet at least, broad-shouldered, and with slender but sinewy forms, they were a score of athletes, and in their picturesque costumes and feather war-bonnets looked very dangerous.

All were well armed, and their horses were gaunt, long-bodied animals, showing both endurance and speed to a great degree.

Their outfit they carried with them, and they were ready for a long march or a hard fight at a moment's notice.

Their horses were all of a deep bay color which matched their tawny skins and Indian-tanned buckskins.

The braves were as silent as ghosts, seemingly having no need for conversation, and moved about among their horses, or around the campfires, like automatons.

One peculiarity of the Indian Ropers was that they all rode Mexican saddles and bridles, instead of those of redskin manufacture, and at the saddle-horn of each hung a long, strong lariat that would catch and hold the wildest of Texas steers.

Such were the Redskin Ropers of the California plains, and better lasso-throwers, riders and shots, no one would wish to have under his command.

They showed some interest as they saw Carlos approaching their camp, and he told them that his wife had breakfast prepared for them.

After their meal they were to go the herders' camp, some miles away, and look after the cattle and horses belonging to the ranch and which had strayed off during the past few days with no one to look after them, for the few cowboys there had been ordered away by the Coasters when they came, as, though with no proof against them, they were under suspicion of knowing that Marlo was an outlaw.

The Ropers were also told by Carlos that their chief was too ill to see them then, but when he was able to do so he would ride over to their camp and give them their orders in person.

The Indians enjoyed immensely the bounteous repast which El Cinto had prepared for them; after which they mounted their horses and went off to the duty devolving upon them.

Then Carlos devoted himself to the care of the sick ranchero, whose fever was slowly subsiding.

After several days the ranchero told Carlos that he thought a couple of days more would see him out of his room, and then he would set about the work he had decided upon with his Redskin Ropers.

As this would take the redskins from the hacienda, he advised Carlos to go to the camp of the Mexican herders and bring back with him the men he would need to look after the cattle.

"How many will you require, Carlos?" he asked.

"Three will be sufficient, señor, I think."

"Hardly; I prefer that you get six, Carlos, for money will be no object, and their pay will be regular and good."

"I know that well, señor; but let us say four, for they surely will be sufficient."

"You have some motive in wishing so few?"

"Yes, señor."

"What is it?"

"Well, señor, I feel that you are going again upon the trail, and it will bring suspicion once more upon those whom you leave here."

"Both El Cinto and myself have had close calls already, and we wish at least to live without suspicion upon ourselves, for we can certainly serve you the better thereby."

"That is true."

"Now, if we have only four herders, they are not enough to attract attention, and will not be thought to be secretly outlaws, as the number of cattle, it will be seen, will demand all their men."

"Very true."

"I shall also pick men, señor, who would be least suspected of being outlaws, and we can be here, then, in peace, make money for you by raising and selling cattle, yet in no way appear to be connected with you, señor, which will be better for us all."

"You reason well, Carlos, and I will leave it to you to do as you deem most prudent."

"You had best occupy my wing of the hacienda, so as to have it thought that I have gone altogether. I will show you secrets about the old structure which you little dream of."

"When I do come to see you, I will arrive and depart by a way which will never be suspected or guarded, and which will leave no trail. In fact, Carlos, I could bring a regiment that way."

Carlos looked surprised, but answered:

"I am surprised at nothing, señor, I learn about this old Mission fortress. The padres who built it must have copied Old World castles and strongholds."

"Shall I start to-night for the herders?"

"Do so, and by your return I will be ready to depart upon my mission."

"May I ask what that mission is, señor?"

"No, you are to know nothing of me or my affairs, and so could take oath, if questioned," was the reply.

That night Carlos departed for the herders' camp, and forty-eight hours after returned with his four men, to find Fuentes quite able and prepared to start upon his expedition, whatever it was.

And before the four herders took up their quarters in their camp, Señor Fuentes, without seeing them, had secretly left the Haunted Hacienda by night, and had disappeared with the Redskin Ropers upon the mission of mystery he had in view.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COASTERS.

THE party of Coasters who had made the successful raid upon the Haunted Hacienda and had taken back with them Marlo, the Smuggler, were naturally proud of their achievement.

They were all young men, not one of them having yet reached the age of twenty-one, for their youthful skipper had selected them all as lads, and because he knew well their perfection as seamen and indomitable pluck.

He did not know what force he would have to fight, and so he went prepared for all emergencies.

Though not exactly a legal expedition, it was yet a just one, for the Coasters were determined to capture Marlo, one of their own people, who had brought disgrace upon them, had broken the laws of their community, as binding as death, and had sought to take the life of a fellow comrade, Ralph, the young skipper and adopted son of the Coaster Chief.

He had also led astray with him his crew of young men, getting several of them slain in their brush with the revenue-cutter, and when their vessel had been lost had been glad enough to seek refuge in the ranches of their people.

When he was known to have sought to kill Ralph Rollo, and the chief sought him in the Range, he had escaped to the coast by night, stolen the chief's own schooner, and put to sea.

Though his comrades had lost their lives in the thunder-storm, Marlo had escaped, and taking advantage of an opportunity to render a service to Senorita Samos, had told her that he was a wealthy gentleman cruising for pleasure and had been wrecked on the coast in a storm, he being the sole survivor.

This he had taken advantage of to crush Fuentes, step into his shoes, as it were, and thus having the power to carry out his revenge against his people, had sought to do so by turning robber, and attacking their houses in the range at night.

With these charges against him it was not to be wondered at that the Coasters were glad to have run their man to earth.

So back to the coast they went, mounted upon horses which they had taken from the drove of the Haunted Hacienda, as they had gone inland on foot.

Their vessel, with two men only left on board, lay at anchor in a little cove completely hidden, and not far from the ruins of an old Spanish Mission situated high upon a spur of the coast.

Arriving at their vessel the horses were turned loose to stray at will, the crew went on board, the anchor was gotten up, sails set and the little vessel ran out into the open sea and turned her sharp prow northward.

She was a pretty craft, stanch, fleet and roomy.

Registering about sixty tons she carried a spread of canvas for a craft twice her size, and under full canvas was as pretty as a picture.

Her young skipper sat at the helm, as she stood out to sea, while Captain Yerger was near him enjoying the lovely scene, the crew being

at their posts and as silent as though on the decks of a vessel-of-war.

Her young skipper was a thorough sailor, brave as a lion, kept perfect discipline, and was idolized by his crew.

He was a handsome lad, with the form of an athlete, and a face that was noble in expression, fearless and determined.

His years were few, for he had not yet reached his eighteenth stepping-stone across the River of Time.

Dressed in a jaunty sailor suit he looked what he was, every inch a seaman.

Amidships, leaning against the weather rail, to which he was chained, was Marlo the outlaw, the man whose short life had been so full of evil adventure and danger.

He was over six feet in height, graceful in build, dressed as a well-to-do ranchero, and had a face that was strikingly handsome and would have been fascinating but for the reckless devil look in his eyes, and a sinister expression about his mouth.

As he sat there by the rail his face showed no sign of the misfortune that had overtaken him on the very verge of the successful carrying out of his plot against Lulita Samos and his revenge upon his people.

His countenance held no indication of the shadow creeping over him which could only end in gloom.

If given over to the keeping of Captain Yerger, as he had fired upon the cutter's crew and taken life, he would suffer death most surely, for were it otherwise he would be only held as a smuggler.

The laws of his own people he knew but too well, and there would be no chance of escape for him there.

Young as was Pearl, the Coaster Chief's daughter, he had loved her with all his soul, and his nature had become warped only when he saw in Ralph Rollo, the shipwrecked lad, a rival.

Now he was going back to face a tribunal from whose decision there was no appeal.

He would have to confront his people, to face the young girl whom he had made the idol of his life, and his sun go down in gloom and suffering.

The crew seemed not to notice his presence, for having done their duty in capturing him, they had no wish to heap abuse upon him, if Ralph would have allowed it, or express their triumph in their glances.

The wind was fresh, the Sea Pearl leaned gracefully to its pressure and went rapidly through the waters, just far enough off-shore for the beauty of the scenery to be noted.

At the peak floated the United States flag, and at the fore the colors of the Coasters, a blue field with a gold spur and silver anchor in the center.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SEA PEARL'S ARRIVAL.

IT was toward sunset on the day following her sailing from the haven near the old ruined Mission on the lower coast, when the Sea Pearl drew near the home of the Coasters on Point Desolation.

The point was wild and rugged, jutting half a mile out into the ocean from the mainland, and in the shape of a horn, which afforded a harbor-age inshore, for there was an inlet beyond forming a basin at the mouth of a stream, and there was the haven of the little fleet.

A light-house was upon the Point, where the cliff rose to a considerable height, and back from it some distance were two other light-houses a quarter of a mile apart.

These had double lights, one red, one blue, and were so placed that in the darkest night, from one side or the other, one of their little fleet caught outside could run in by pointing on a course which would bring either of the near lights on a line with the light-house on the cliff, showing the blue on one side, the red on the other.

The reef half a league off-shore rendered this necessary, as there were only two channels through it for vessels to pass in or out.

By day the breaks could be seen, but at night the lights were needed to guide the pilot into the harbor through the reef.

It was upon this reef a number of vessels had struck, and this fact alone had given the Coasters the name of being wreckers, setting false beacons to lure a craft to its destruction.

The coming of the little schooner was noted, and flags were at once set upon the flagstaffs on the cliff and run up over the different cabin homes of the Coasters scattered all over the Point.

Over a large cabin back upon the ridge, with

trees and gardens about it, were these flag-staffs.

Upon the center one there was now hoisted the Stars and Stripes, with the revenue flag to the right, and the spur and anchor flag, denoting the calling of the people, half-ranchero, half-sailor, on the left.

This was the home of Captain Karl, the Coaster Chief.

As the schooner neared the reef, the revenue flag was also run up to the main-top, in honor of the presence on board of Captain Yerger, and with all sail set she went dashing through the reef channel and heading for an anchorage in the inlet nearly a league beyond.

"Well, Ralph, you are here again, and come back with flying colors; see, they are firing a salute for you," and as Captain Yerger spoke, from the cliff two ship's guns boomed forth a welcome.

"Those guns were taken from the Rainbow, Captain Yerger, the vessel that I was on, and which was wrecked just yonder where the sea breaks wildest on the reef.

"The guns went off her deck when she broke up, and were found on the reef at low tide," said Ralph, and he added:

"That salute is for you, captain, for we never fire a gun for our own vessels.

"I appreciate the honor, Ralph; but see, Marlo now begins to feel that his doom is sealed," and the prisoner was seen to gaze with an anxious look toward the crowded cliff.

"Poor fellow! I can but pity him, for there is no hope for him."

"You think it best, then, that he should not be given into my keeping for trial, Ralph?"

"No, Captain Yerger, for you were not in your official capacity when we captured him, and there is an unwritten law among the Coasters that one who sins against his own people must be tried and judged by them."

"I yield to you, Ralph, and to the wishes of your people, for they are to be humored in all their proper usages.

"As you say, too, I am not here as Captain Yerger, but plain Edgar Yerger, your ally in this cruise, and I can only report that Marlo the outlaw has met his just punishment for his crimes.

"You handle a craft beautifully, Ralph, and will make a fine naval officer when you get an appointment one of these days in the future."

"Thank you, sir; but there is the chief, his wife and Pearl, and they are waving to us."

As Ralph spoke he called to his men to take in sail, and the topsails came down in splendid style, the balloon jib followed, then the flying jib and foresail, and under fore staysail and mainsail the schooner swept into the little harbor, rounded to and let go her anchors.

"Splendidly done, Ralph."

"Bravo, my lads," cried Captain Yerger to the young skipper and his crew, for he had watched all with the enthusiasm of the perfect sailor that he was.

The boat took ashore the young skipper, Captain Yerger, the prisoner and four seamen, and as it landed it was met by two men dressed in black gowns completely shielding their forms and with their faces masked also.

These stepped forward amid a perfect silence and placed themselves upon each side of the prisoner, who shuddered slightly as they did so, yet still maintained his upright bearing and calm demeanor.

He was marched at once away to the prison of the settlement, after which a greeting was given to the young victor by the Coasters, who were a sunburnt, hardy lot of people, men, women, and children.

The Coaster Chief, a man of noble presence, with his wife, a woman of rare beauty, and their daughter, Pearl, a perfect little fairy, greeted Captain Yerger and Ralph most cordially, and then all marched off toward the cabin of the ruler of these strange people who was known to them as "Captain Karl," and whose strange life history of wrong the reader is aware of.

The home was not that of a common person, but one of education and refinement far above these humble people with whom he had sought and found a haven of refuge.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRIBUNAL.

NIGHT fell upon the scene of the settlement of the Coasters' seaside homes, and all was hushed.

From the different cabins came no sound of music or song, no laughter and gay voices, as was the wont, for they were a merry people in their homes, these people of the sea.

All seemed to feel that in their midst was one

over whom hung the shadow of death, and they felt the gloom that rested over all.

To the Coaster Chief Ralph told the story of the crime and capture of Marlo, and all listened with the deepest attention and were glad to feel that the merciless outlaw, who had proven their bitterest foe, was no longer to be feared.

It was late when they sought their rooms for the night, but there were two who were not to retire, for duty called them elsewhere.

These two were the Coaster Chief and Ralph. After saying good-night, Ralph, who slept on board his vessel, took his leave, and Captain Karl accompanied him.

But it was not to the vessel that they went after leaving the cabin.

Their steps led them to the cliff, where a red light was burning over the prison.

The latter was a strong structure built of stone over the mouth of a cavern in the cliff, and in which there was a massive door studded with iron.

Before this door stood two men as guards, and they were enveloped in a long black gown and masked.

They saluted the chief as he approached, and one said:

"The Tribunal is in session now, Señor Chief."

"It is well," was the answer, and stepping to the door the Coaster Captain gave a peculiar knock.

A man advanced from within, his step silent, for he wore canvas slippers, and seeing who it was that the red lantern over the door revealed to his eyes, he opened the portal and said simply:

"Enter, most exalted judge of the actions of the Tribunal."

The man was covered with a black gown, upon the heart of which was embroidered a red hand holding a flaming torch.

His face was also masked, while upon the forehead of the black mask was an eye, emblematical of one who must see clearly.

Even the man's hands were incased in gloves, and he handed to the chief a robe which he at once threw over his shoulders, while upon his head he placed a high, square cap.

It was black, and on the front was a pair of scales held out by a hand, all embroidered in white.

The face of the chief was not masked, and no robe was given to Ralph.

The man then led the way into an inner room, and thence back into the cavern.

The inner room was the prison chamber, and a few benches, a table and iron chains fastened into the walls were the only furniture it contained.

The inner room was hung with black, and in the further end was an altar behind which was a seat.

Upon the right were three small tables, draped in red, and upon each was a lantern and an open book, an inkstand and a quill pen.

On the left of the altar was a seat, and it was here the prisoner sat facing the three men who were at the little tables and who were the Tribunal.

It was one of the Tribunal who had admitted the chief and Ralph.

The latter was taken to a position facing the altar, so that he could also see the Tribunal and prisoner.

The Coaster Chief at once ascended to the seat behind the altar, raised his hands as if in invocation and sat down.

He then said in a low, impressive tone:

"I am here to listen to the words of accusation against the prisoner, and to hear what the Tribunal has decided upon."

"I bring with me one witness, for no other is necessary."

Marlo was dressed in a white gown, and wore a cap of the same snowy hue, while his face was unmasked.

The white was doubtless emblematical that he was considered pure, or innocent, until the decree of guilty went forth against him.

The center man of the Tribunal arose at the words of the chief, and said:

"Most Exalted Judge, we have listened to every word that fell from the lips of the prisoner in extenuation of his own acts, and we can only see by the light of his testimony that he is guilty of the charges against him."

"Name these charges!"

"The charges, Most Exalted Judge, are that Marlo, our comrade, against the laws that govern our people, became a smuggler, and led astray with him the crew of his vessel."

"We charge that he thus outlawed himself

and his men, and when pursued by the regular officers of the Government, fired upon them, killing several men, while he also sacrificed the lives of three of his companions."

"We charge that he came here, after the loss of his vessel, and went with his crew to the range, from whence he came, with others, one night, and sought to take the life of our comrade, Ralph Rollo, by foul means."

"We charge that he fled by way of the sea, with his crew, and cut out the vessel of the chief, thereby constituting himself a robber of his own people."

"We charge that in his flight he lost the vessel, and sacrificed the lives of his crew."

"Furthermore, Most Exalted Judge, it is for your witness to speak of the crimes of Marlo, our comrade."

The speaker resumed his seat, and a silence like death fell upon those present.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SENTENCE.

NEARLY a minute passed before a word was spoken, and the silence was becoming most painful, when the chief at last said:

"I have heard the charges of the Tribunal against the prisoner, and would know if he is found guilty of all?"

"Guilty of all," came in the voices of the three, as they arose.

"I have now to place before this august Tribunal my witness, that he may make known to you the charges he prefers against our comrade, Marlo."

Thus referred to Ralph turned to the Tribunal and said:

"With the kind permission given me by the Tribunal, I would ask not to make any charge against our comrade, Marlo, as it would seem that he has been found guilty at our hands of those crimes you charged him with."

"It is the command of the Tribunal that the witness charge against the prisoner all that he knows to his detriment."

Thus commanded Ralph, with a glance at the prisoner, said in a distinct voice, though at first there was a quiver of emotion in it:

"I charge that one night when I returned to my vessel I found the prisoner there awaiting me, and he challenged me to meet him in a duel."

"I felt forced to comply, and when we went ashore we found seconds there, one of whom pretended to serve me, while in reality he was the friend of Comrade Marlo, for he placed no bullet in my pistol."

"I was wounded here, you behold the scar, and was taken aboard my vessel and left for dead."

"I charge that when Comrade Marlo discovered that I was not dead, it was then he came down from the range, cut out the chief's schooner, of which I was sailing-master, and put to sea."

"The Tribunal knows the fate that overtook the vessel."

"Need I say more?"

"Yes, all that you know of the crimes of the prisoner," came in the voices of the three.

Then Ralph told the story of the attack on the chief's ranch, the supposed death of the prisoner, how he had discovered that Marlo had gotten a foothold far down the coast on a ranch and was using his power thus obtained for wrong.

He made no effort now to escape telling all that he knew, and his narrative was listened to with the deepest attention by the Tribunal, while the prisoner did not move or take his eyes off the speaker, who was his accuser.

When Ralph at last finished his story, again a deathlike silence followed, until broken by the Coaster Chief, who said:

"The Tribunal have heard the charges of my witness?"

"We have."

"Will the Tribunal withdraw to council?"

"There is no need, Most Exalted Judge."

"Your minds are made up?"

"Wholly."

"You are decided upon the innocence or guilt of the prisoner on the charges of this witness?"

"We are."

"And your verdict, most august Tribunal?"

"Guilty!" came in a tone that was startling so deep and impressive it was.

"Prisoner, stand up."

The prisoner obeyed, leaning heavily upon the table before him.

"You have heard the verdict of the Tribunal?"

"I have."

"It is that you are guilty."

"It is that I am guilty."
 "With no palliation, no finding of innocence in any one charge against you."
 "It is so."
 "What have you to say against this finding of the Tribunal?"
 "Not one word."
 "You are guilty?"
 "I am."
 "Self-convicted now?"
 "I am."
 "Then what have you to say against my passing sentence upon you?"
 "Not one word."
 Again an awful silence, and then came the words of the judge:
 "To obey my oath of office, as chief of my people, there remains for me only to pass upon you a sentence of death."
 "Did I do otherwise I would fail in my duty to my oath and my people."
 "Marlo, you are to die, and may Heaven have mercy upon your guilty soul!"
 A groan forced its way between the shut teeth of the prisoner but he showed no other emotion.
 Then the judge said:
 "It remains for the Tribunal to pass upon your death, prisoner, for it is their duty to decide how you shall die."
 "Most august Tribunal, I leave the prisoner in your keeping."
 With this the judge arose, and taking off his hat and gown placed them upon his chair.
 Then he stepped toward the prisoner and said:
 "Comrade Marlo, having cast aside my robes of office, I can now, as a man, offer my hand to you in farewell, and say to you from my inmost heart that I pray Heaven may have mercy upon your soul."
 The chief's hand was extended as he spoke and Marlo quickly grasped it, bent his head and said:
 "Farewell."
 Then Ralph stepped forward, and as he offered his hand, said:
 "Comrade Marlo, I freely forgive you for your wrong against me, and I too offer my hand in farewell."
 "Will you not take it?"
 "No!"
 The word broke savagely from the lips of Marlo, and then followed:
 "You have brought me to this, and I leave you my dying curse, Ralph Rollo."
 An exclamation of horror broke from the lips of the Coaster Chief and the Tribunal, but though the words cut deep, Ralph said in a tone of perfect calmness:
 "I am sorry, Comrade Marlo, to hear you curse; but again I say farewell."
 With this he followed the Coaster Chief from the chamber.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SUMMONS.

BUT little was said by Ralph and the Coaster Chief as they walked from the prison; but reaching the pathway leading down to the shore the youth remarked with forced cheerfulness:
 "Good-night, father; I will be up in time for breakfast."
 "It was a sad scene, Ralph," said the chief, pausing.
 "Indeed it was, sir."
 "He deserved his fate."
 "True, father, but I do not believe that I deserved his dying curse."
 "That is the way to feel about it, lad, for you did only your duty."
 "Good-night, and remember, as this is your last appearance before a Tribunal, you are to keep everything secret."
 "Yes, sir."
 "No one knows who the other black-robed figure is, even the Tribunal not knowing each other."
 "The men draw numbers secretly, and those getting numbers to serve on the Tribunal dare not tell."
 "Only the judge, the prisoner and the witnesses go unmasked, and as you saw, the judge does not say how the prisoner is to die."
 "Who does?"
 "The Tribunal, and they send secretly so many bills, and when the men assemble they draw for a fatal lot of executioner."
 "Then only the man himself is aware that he has been the one to put an end to the prisoner, which must be in the manner decided by the Tribunal."
 "There have been but two executions in the story of the settlement, Father Karl?"
 "Yes, and I hope this may be the last."

"Good-night, my boy," and the Coaster chief walked on to his cabin while Ralph went on in the path leading to the shore.
 He was about to enter his boat and row out to the schooner when he heard his name called.
 He at once turned and beheld a black-robed form and masked face near him.
 The night was dark, but he saw that it was one of the men who acted as guard for the Tribunal.
 "I am here to hand you this summons, Master Ralph," the man said in a suppressed tone.
 "From the Tribunal?"
 "It is."
 "When is the call?"
 "At once."
 "I will go," and Ralph placed the blank slip of paper in his pocket and walked back up the hill path, the guard halting as he was about to go on his way and saying:
 "You are to go to the prison chamber."
 "Yes."
 Ralph walked briskly on, wondering why he had received a summons, and he was soon at the prison.
 A guard stood there and ushered him into the room, now totally dark, and another met him within and said:
 "Here is your robe, mask and hat."
 All of these were of different shapes, some padded, others not, and all precautions taken to disguise the form of any man.
 Even the difference in height was thought of, and shoulders were built up, hats made higher and masks changed to suit.
 Gloves were also put upon the hands, and then the guard allowed Ralph to enter the Tribunal Chamber, where there was the dimmest of lights burning and some score of men assembled, all robed in black and masked.
 A few others came in after Ralph, and then the guard opened the door and said:
 "The summons is complete, most august Tribunal."
 "Bring in the prisoner, guard!"
 While the guard was absent on this mission, the Head of the Tribunal said:
 "Comrades, place yourselves in line before the prisoner's stand!"
 This was done in silence.
 Then the lamps on the Tribunal's tables were turned up, and the one before the prisoner's stand.
 A moment after the door swung open and two guards entered with the prisoner between them.
 He was deadly pale, but perfectly calm, and walked with a firm step to his place.
 Then he faced the line of men from whom was to be selected his executioner.
 The Tribunal then arose and said:
 "Prisoner, you have heard your sentence of death from the lips of the Most Exalted Judge?"
 "I have."
 The voice was perfectly firm.
 "We have decided upon what death you shall die, and all arrangements have been made."
 "I am ready."
 "You face now those from whom your executioner is to be chosen."
 "They shall not see me flinch," was the bold response, and a murmur of admiration at the prisoner's nerve went through the chamber.
 The Head of the Tribunal now came around to the front of the line of black-robed and masked men and in his hand he held a blood-red box.
 In the center of the top was a small hole, large enough to admit easily a man's hand.
 He began at the head of the line and halted in front of the first man, saying simply:
 "Draw!"
 The man put his hand into the box and it was seen to tremble.
 He drew it out, and as he did so the Head of the Tribunal said:
 "Keep your lot hidden in your hand!"
 So on down the line he went, and all drew.
 Then came the words:
 "Walk singly by the lamp and behold your lot."
 "The one who holds the red ball, pass on with the others into the Midnight Room, and there he is to halt until called!"
 And the procession passed out of the Tribunal Chamber.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE EXECUTIONER.

WHEN the line of lot drawers passed out of the room all placed their hands over the red box and dropped back into it the lot they had drawn, all except one.
 Something soft in the box kept the balls from

sounding as they fell, so no one knew who had drawn the red ball.

Out into the Midnight Chamber they fled, and there were guards in the darkness standing near the outer entrance to take from them their robes, hat and mask.

Singly they went, each man getting away before another came out.

But one hung in the background, he who had drawn the fatal red ball of the executioner.

There he stood in silence, awaiting his summons back to the Tribunal Chamber.

At last it came, in a voice almost at his elbow:

"Executioner, enter here!"

The man obeyed.

The Tribunal still sat there, and the prisoner was in his place.

"Executioner, face the prisoner."

The man obeyed.

"You are sworn to obey the laws of this Tribunal, or suffer death as the penalty of disobedience?"

"Yes, Most August Tribunal."

"It is well, and your orders are to be given you now."

The man bowed in silence.

"In the covered shed on the shore, known as the Life-boat House, a boat has been taken from this Chamber and placed for your use."

"It is a black boat with red oars, and it has two seats, one for the oarsman, one for the prisoner."

"In the boat are chains which you are to wrap around the prisoner from head to foot, and you are to row out one mile from the shore and then raise the end of the board upon which he lies, and let him slide over the boat's stern into the sea."

"My God!" broke from the lips of the prisoner.

The executioner uttered no word, but remained as motionless as a statue in ebony.

"You are then to row back to the boat-house, leave your boat there, and returning to this Tribunal Chamber divest yourself of your robe and disguise, and go your way."

"There will be no one here to see you, and you can leave the key in the outer door."

"After a given time four guards will go to the boat-house for the boat, and the execution of the prisoner will be ended."

"You have three hours to dawn, and half that time will suffice."

"Do you understand?"

"I do."

"The prisoner will now be allowed to utter a prayer, and then his arms are to be bound and he will be loaded with chains."

"He will also be gagged to prevent outcry."

"Now, prisoner, you have five minutes in which to offer up a prayer to the Heaven you have sinned against."

"I will not be guilty of mockery, so will offer up no prayer."

"Let me be led forth to my doom," was the bold response of the prisoner.

"So be it, prisoner; it shall be as you wish; but, pity indeed is it that a man of your great courage should have thrown his life away by acts so heinous."

"May Heaven have mercy upon your guilty soul, is the prayer of those who send you to your death," said the Head of the Tribunal in a voice full of emotion.

And distinct and firm came the one word from the lips of the executioner:

"Amen!"

Even the prisoner started at its utterance, but without a word held himself ready to meet his fate.

He was about to be gagged securely by the Tribunal, when he said:

"Save me such indignity, I beg of you, for I will make no outcry."

"I will utter no word of pleading for mercy."

The Tribunal conversed together in a low tone, and then the Head said:

"Remember, no outcry on this night will bring any one to your aid, for all know that it is execution night."

"I will utter no outcry," was the prisoner's firm response.

"So be it, you shall not be gagged."

The chains were then laid over his shoulders, and his hands were clasped together by manacles.

"Executioner, you will find manacles in the boat for his feet, and this same key will lock them on."

"I understand," was the firm response.

"I am ready," said the prisoner, and the two, the executioner and the doomed man, walked together from the Tribunal Chamber.

They saw no guard, they left the three robed men behind them, and they took the path down to the Life-boat House, which was not a cable's length from the prison.

Reaching the boat-house, the black boat with its red oars was found, and the board lay across the stern.

It was as slippery as glass, so that the form would slide off readily into the sea.

There in the boat were the chains, and the prisoner was ordered to get in, when his feet were at once manacled.

He made no resistance, the oars were taken up by the executioner and the boat moved slowly out from the shore.

The night was intensely dark, the waters of the inlet were as placid as a mill-pond and only the roar of the breakers on the reef broke the stillness of the night.

The boat had not gone far from the shore before it would have been completely lost to sight to any one who might have been standing upon the shore watching its departure.

The executioner was on his way over the dark waters to the scene of execution in the deep black waters.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STRANGE SCENE.

THE oarsman was as silent as his prisoner, as he rowed out over the waters with a long, powerful stroke, feathering his oars skillfully at every stroke, and using his muscular arms for the strong pull rather than the weight of his body.

He was pulling a peculiar stroke, and sending his boat along with an ease that was surprising.

What his thoughts were who can imagine, at the feeling that he was pledged to load a man down with chains and then sink him alive into the depths of the sea.

To one of a sensitive nature it was as great suffering to be the executioner as the victim.

What the feelings of the doomed man were it would be hard to fathom.

To die was hard enough, but to go down into the dark depths alive, sinking down, down to his death while yet alive was appalling.

So over the placid waters rowed the boat toward the fatal spot.

At last the prisoner said in a low voice:

"I know you."

"Who am I?"

"One from whom I need expect no mercy."

"Remember the vow I am under to obey, whether I would be merciful or not."

"I know it all; but you are merciless."

"And you were called Merciless Marlo."

"True, and I was merciless."

"Yet you expect others to be merciful."

"I do not expect it."

"Nor ask it?"

"Yes, I would plead for mercy."

"To me?"

"Yes, even to you, did I believe you had it in your heart to be merciful?"

"Why not I as well as any other?"

"You are differently situated."

"How so?"

"I have wronged you individually."

"In what way?"

"You well know."

"You said that you knew me."

"I do."

"How did you recognize me?"

"From the manner in which you handled the oars."

"Many might row as I do."

"Yes, none do."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Who am I?"

"One that surprised me by not wishing to appear against me before the Tribunal."

"That tells nothing."

"Still I am not guessing; I know you."

"Who am I, again I ask you?"

"The worst foe I have on earth."

"You have many."

"True, yet not one so bitter as you are."

"You are only trying to discover by the tone of my voice who I am."

"What good would that do me when I cannot live for revenge?"

"True; but my name, if you know me."

"Dare I breathe it, even here?"

"Yes."

"I will whisper it."

"You need not fear to speak out, for no one will hear."

"You are—"

Again the man paused.

"Who?"

"Ralph Rollo."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Well?"

"Well, I am to die by your hand."

"You are condemned to death, and I am sworn to be your executioner."

"I did not expect this, for I had gone on my way to my vessel, when overtaken by the guard with the summons to return."

"It hurt me, for I felt that I had done my duty in bringing you to punishment."

"Yes, you had."

"But, Marlo, I wish you to understand me now."

"I do—you take pleasure in your revenge."

"You are mistaken."

"So you assert."

"I mean it, and when I found that I had gotten the little red ball that was fatal to you and made me your executioner, I felt a certain sense of relief when I heard your sentence."

"How so?"

"I felt that no law bound me to the Coasters, no pledge strong enough to cause me to carry out the sentence upon you."

"Great God! do you mean what you say?" cried the prisoner.

"Hush! not so loud, for the waters carry the voice very far."

"I will be careful, but oh! tell me what you mean?"

"I do not intend to be your executioner," was the response of the oarsman.

"You do not intend to kill me?" almost gasped the prisoner.

"I do not intend to load you with chains and sink you alive into the sea, as the Tribunal has ordered me to do," was the firm response of the masked and black-robed oarsman.

"Do you intend to spare me?" cried the prisoner, excitedly.

"Not so loud, Marlo!"

"I will be careful; but tell me if you mean to spare me?"

"See, I am rowing for the shore across the inlet."

"Yes."

"You know that there is a pasture there where the Coasters always keep a hundred or more horses."

"I know, I know!"

"No herder is there on watch, and saddles and bridles are kept in the little shed."

"Yes."

"I will land you on the other shore, you can reach the pasture in a few minutes, select your horse and go your way."

"I am sorry I have neither food or weapons with me, but I have some money which I will give you, and all I ask, Marlo, is that you in future, warned by this night, lead a different life."

"Will you do this?"

"I will! I will! Here is my hand on it."

"No; when you were, as I believed, about to die, I offered you my hand, but now that you are to live I will not take yours."

"Here we are ashore, so go your way as soon as I unlock your irons."

CHAPTER XIX.

UNDISCOVERED.

THE irons were left in the boat, resting upon the board that trailed over the stern, and as the prisoner sprung ashore the executioner, whom the reader now knows to have been Ralph, the captor of Marlo, sent the little craft flying back over the dark waters.

Arriving in the center of the bay, or inlet, he raised the board, and the man of chains sunk into the waters with a splash which made Ralph shudder, for he could not but think of them as enveloping a human form, and dragging a man to death down in the depths.

Resuming his oars again, Ralph rowed ashore with all his speed, landing at the life-boat-house.

He went on up to the prison, placed the keys where he had been told to, and disrobing of the black gown, mask, hat and gloves, he left the dismal structure.

Dawn was yet an hour away, and he hastened on his way down the path to the harbor where his own boat was dragged up upon the sands, awaiting his return.

Shoving it into the water he could but recall the scenes he had passed through with since three hours before he had stood in that spot, and received the Tribunal's summons.

Out to his schooner he went, and entering his cabin he lighted his lamp, for there was no one who slept aboard except himself.

The cabin was very roomy and almost luxuriously furnished, for the craft had been a yacht,

sold by its owner in San Francisco, as he intended to return to New York overland.

It was some time before the young sailor could gain complete control over his nerves, but at last he did so, and just as dawn began to lighten the eastern skies he extinguished his lamp and threw himself all dressed as he was upon his bed.

A couple of hours he slept, and he awoke at hearing his name called.

"Come, Ralph, how lazy you are, for it is breakfast-time."

He sprung from his bunk, glared up through the companionway, and found Pearl coming toward the schooner in her little skiff.

"Ah, Pearl, it is you?"

"Yes, and I expected to find you asleep, you lazy fellow, but here you are up and dressed."

"But I have come for you, so don't keep us all waiting, as I am hungry as a catamount."

"You always are, Pearl."

And Ralph laughed, for, with the sunshine and the remembrance that he did not have the life of Marlo upon his hands, a life taken as his would have been, in irons, helpless and at his mercy to send to the bottom of the sea, brightness came back into his heart once more.

He quickly made his toilet, and springing into the skiff, was rowed ashore by Pearl, who led the way up home.

Breakfast was just ready as they arrived, and Mrs. Karl said:

"We had not seen you moving on deck, Ralph, so Pearl thought you might be ill and went for you."

"She was very kind indeed."

"And I knew you had to appear against Marlo last night, and I supposed you were tired out from worry," Pearl said.

"I did not rest well last night, I admit."

And Ralph gave a quick glance at Karl, who remarked:

"All of us will feel better now, for last night ended the life of the unfortunate man who has caused us all so much of sorrow."

"Did he commit suicide?" quickly asked Captain Yerger.

"Oh no, but he was tried."

"So won?"

"Yes, the Tribunal tried him without delay, Captain Yerger, for here the law of justice moves quickly."

"He was found guilty and his sentence followed."

"And that sentence?"

"Was death."

"And his execution followed so soon?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so, for we act promptly in such matters."

"And what was the sentence?"

"To die, more I cannot tell you, for even I do not know, as the Tribunal decide the manner of his death."

"You may be sure though that he is dead, for the sun is never allowed to rise upon a sentenced prisoner."

During this conversation Ralph uttered no word, and from his perfectly impassive face no one would have supposed that he had passed through such an ordeal as the one that the night had hidden from view.

As the conversation was changed Captain Yerger said that he must return to duty once more, and asked Ralph if he would carry him up to the city of San Francisco in his schooner.

The youth was more than glad to do so, and later in the day the crew of the Sea Pearl saw the signal to sail set on board and rapidly went to the schooner to report.

Captain Yerger went on board later, and the pretty craft stood out of the harbor, went beating out to sea and once through the reef squared away up the coast for her run to the city of San Francisco.

Some days after the Sea Pearl returned from her voyage, and Ralph came loaded down, as he always did, with presents for Mrs. Karl, Pearl, and the Coaster Chief.

He found all at the settlement just as he had left it, and breathed more freely to find out that Marlo had not been captured, or any suspicion of his escape from death was held by any one at Point Desolation.

"Yes, I am undiscovered, and no one suspects the truth; but it will be death to me if the escape of Marlo is known," muttered Ralph, and he felt more at ease, for well he knew the merciless laws that governed the little community.

CHAPTER XX.

THE REDSKIN ROAD-AGENTS.

SOME weeks after the departure of the Outlaw Ranchero and the Redskin Ropers from the Haunted Hacienda, the north-bound coach was

rolling along the trail, neither driver nor passengers suspecting danger, when suddenly half a dozen lariats came whirling through the air and each one of the six horses attached to the stage were cleverly and unerringly captured.

The lariats had come from each side of the trail, three from the right, three from the left, and the nooses had settled over the heads of the horses.

The startled animals had bounded forward, but the team were all brought to a sudden halt.

The driver had raised his long-lashed whip to bring it down upon the backs of the leaders, to enable them to break loose from the coils that held them, when suddenly a horseman appeared in the trail ahead of them, and as he leveled a rifle at the heart of the man who held the ribbons called out:

"Don't do it, pard, for it's no use.

"Your coach is my game this run, so hands up all!"

The horseman was in the costume of a chief, and his face was in full war-paint.

The driver quickly obeyed, dropping his reins after a turn around the coach-lamp, and raising his hands over his head, while he said:

"Waal, I minds durned suddint, for when Injuns goes ter holdin' up stage-coaches on ther trail I passes every time and you, Big Chief, kin call ther game, for I hain't in it a little bit."

The Indian chief rode closer now to the coach and said, while he slung his rifle to his saddle-horn and drew a revolver:

"A glance behind you, driver, will show that you are hemmed in on all sides."

With a quick glance over his shoulder the driver saw that there were mere redskins behind the coach, and while the six lasso-throwers held firmly to the lines, others appeared in view from the thickets.

"Waal, I'll declar'!

"Injun road-agents and enough ter eat me up."

"This beats my time.

"Speak up, redskins, and say what game yer is playing."

"You carry the mail?" said the stern voice of the chief.

"Ah! that's ther way yer talk, is it?

"Waal, yer hain't Injuns, arter all."

"Yes, we are Indians, but I speak English so you can understand me; but if you prefer it I will speak in Spanish."

"Don't do it, chief, for English are good enough ter suit me."

"Then you understand my question?"

"What was it?"

"That you carry the mail?"

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"If yer know'd, why in thunder did yer ask about it?"

"See here, no trifling, or the coach company will have to find another driver."

"Waal, what if I does carry the mail?"

"I want it."

"And Uncle Sam will want you, and git you, too; don't you forget it."

"What passengers have you?"

"Two, and as poor as sin."

"I'll see for myself."

With this he rode to the door, opened it, and said bluntly:

"Get out!"

The two men did so, trembling in every joint.

"What money have you with you?"

"There is my purse," said one, and he handed it up to the chief.

"I have but little money, but here is my watch," the other said.

"You are both deceiving me, for you have plenty of money with you; but if you love gold more than life, so be it."

"Hold on! I'll give up all I have," cried one man in terror, and he unbuckled a belt of money from about his waist.

"Thank you."

"Now, sir, for your contribution for Lo the poor Indian," said the chief, in a sarcastic tone.

"I have more money with me, yes; but it is all that I have in the world," the other man said.

"Earn more; for that I want, and will have."

"Here it is."

And it was given up.

"Now the mail-bags, driver."

"Hain't you satisfied?"

"No."

"Yer has ter be."

"How so?"

"Don't carry no mail this trip."

The chief spoke to two of his warriors and in the Indian tongue.

Instantly they leaped upon the fore-wheels of the coach, one on either side, and dragged out from beneath the driver's feet three bags of mail.

The chief smiled and the driver swore.

"Now you can go on, and remember that the Redskin Road-Agents will stand no trifling, so be careful if you value your life!"

"I has heard o' you away up on ther northern trails a-holdin' up coaches, and I is durned sorry yer didn't stay thar."

"Go!"

"I'm off!"

And the two passengers springing into the coach, the driver started on his way, muttering curses as he did so and lashing his horses viciously to vent his spite as best he could.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MISSING MAIDEN.

THE report spread all along the border, that there were Redskin Road-Agents on the trails, and travelers began to be very cautious about taking money with them from point to point.

The stage-drivers too were most careful to hide away any valuables or money they might have to carry, and to keep a bright lookout for a hold-up on the road.

But for all this stage-coaches were held up every few days, travelers were robbed and a wagon-train was halted and looted.

When no resistance was offered no harm was done the individual other than to rob him of all that he had of value that could be found about him.

But when resistance was offered, or a shot fired, then the Redskin Road-Agents, under their daring and cunning chief, became as cruel and merciless as it was their nature to be upon the war-path.

As long as the coaches alone were the objects of attack by the Redskin Outlaws, only a show at capture was made by soldiers sent from the distant posts, and which resulted in no good.

Of course the soldiers moved slowly, their march was known and there was not a Redskin Road-Agent seen upon the whole expedition.

But at last a ranch was raided one night by the Redskin Outlaws and a great deal of valuable property was stolen, for it was the home of a wealthy ranchero.

At once the ranchmen began to talk of hunting down the outlaw band.

But they did no more than talk until a second ranch was raided.

This caused them to organize a Vigilante company, but when ready for service no one knew where to look for the outlaws, and it fell through.

As there were no other robberies for weeks, the ranchmen began to pride themselves that their organization, which so far had never done anything, had frightened the Redskin Road-Agents out of the country.

But suddenly, like a thunder-clap, came the tidings along the line of coast ranches, as the places some leagues back from the sea were called, that the redskins had raided the fine old home of Señor Samos, and carried off his beautiful daughter as captive.

This was a severe blow all along the ranches, for all felt that they had delayed too long to act, and the result was that the redskins had struck the most cruel blow of all, for the beauty and lovely character of Lulita Samos were known far and wide.

At last, with this incentive, the ranchmen got together, each one accompanied by from five to six of his cowboys, and a force of fifty well-mounted, thoroughly-armed brave men took the field to go to the rescue of the fair captive and avenge the insult upon her.

As they swept down into the country of the Haunted Hacienda they were met by the half-distracted father, followed by a score of his faithful cowboys.

From his lips they learned the whole story.

The Samos Hacienda had not been raided, but, in the absence of the señor from home a messenger had come to his home telling the señorita Lulita that her father had been taken seriously ill near the Haunted Hacienda and was lying there awaiting her coming.

Not a single cowboy of the Samos Ranch happened to be near, and leaving word with her old nurse for them to follow her, Lulita mounted her horse and accompanied the messenger.

Soon after her father returned, and it was at nightfall.

He heard, with great alarm, the story told by the nurse, sent for the cowboys to assemble and rode with all speed to the Haunted Hacienda.

A loud summons at the gate aroused Carlos and his wife, and the surprise of the man and woman, when the Señor Samos demanded their daughter, showed that they were innocent of any knowledge of her.

But Señor Samos searched the Hacienda nevertheless, and finding no trace of his missing daughter, returned to his own home to mount fresh horses and take the trail at daybreak.

With the first glimmer of light they were on the trail of the two horses, and found that it led to a spot some miles away, where it was found that it came upon a spot where a dozen horses had been in waiting.

From there it led to the coast, right into the sea, and the señor and his followers had been searching far and wide ever since for some clue by which to find his missing child.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE KIDNAPPERS.

AS the reader has doubtless surmised, the messenger sent to Señorita Samos, with a false report of her father's illness, came from Fuentes, the Outlaw Ranchero.

She had obeyed, prompted by love, and had gone unhesitatingly with the messenger.

He was a dark-faced fellow, a Mexican evidently, but spoke English well, and said that he was a cowboy upon the Haunted Hacienda Ranch.

When they had gone a few miles, the man led the way into a canyon, when, quick as a flash, two lariats were thrown from ambush and settled over the head of Lulita and her horse.

Both were fairly caught, the horse beyond possibility of dashing away, and the fair rider with her arms pinioned close to her side.

At the same moment she was surrounded by a score of redskins.

At first Lulita supposed that they had been surprised by a band of roving Indians, but a glance showed her that the Mexican messenger was left undisturbed.

He calmly sat upon his horse, and when she turned to him indignantly, he smiled and said:

"I but obeyed orders, señorita, and was paid for my work."

"By whom were you given orders to commit this act of treachery?"

"By one who will explain for himself."

"And my father is not ill?"

"Not that I am aware of, señorita."

Just then there rode forward one who appeared to be an Indian chief, and as he drew rein near the maiden, he said:

"We meet again, Señorita Samos."

"Ah! you are not an Indian, then?"

"Only by adoption, Señorita Lulita."

"Who are you?"

"Cannot you guess?"

"I know that voice now."

"Yes, you have heard it often before, heard it when it muttered words of love into your then willing ears, a love which I still feel for you, and hence my capture of you, so that I may teach you to return that love, Lulita."

"Silence, sir!"

"How dare you repeat such words to me?"

"I dare do anything, Lulita Samos."

"Yes, very true."

"You are Marco Fuentes, the Outlaw Ranchero."

"Yes, I am Marco Fuentes, who saved you from capture by Mario the Merciless Marauder, as but for my revenge he would have had you in his power ere this."

"I can see no difference between you, for you are both outlaws, both fiends in human form; yes, all that is cruel, heinous and despicable."

"With such an opinion of you, do you expect me to be won by you?" said Lulita, with cutting sarcasm.

"I may teach you to do so yet."

"Never!"

"Then policy may force you to do so, or at least pretend an affection you do not feel."

"I would die first."

"We shall see."

"If it is gold you wish for my ransom, you can get it, for I will write my father a note, and you can secure your money."

"I want both you and your gold, for I will never accept the riches of Lulita Samos unless her hand goes with it."

She made no reply, and he continued:

"You have doubtless heard of the Redskin Road-Agents?"

"Yes, a lot of white men disguised as such, and who have been committing the greatest acts of villainy."

"You are mistaken, for they are all Indians except myself."

"Yet there is one who at once casts the lie in your teeth."

"That man I sent as a messenger to you?"

"Yes."

"He was sent for and engaged for his work, so our compact is at an end, and he can go his way when we have reached the coast, where our trail will end."

"The coast?"

"Yes, for we go to the coast."

"Oh, man! have you no mercy?"

"You need have no fear."

"Will you come with me without force, or shall I bind you to your horse?"

"Do not bind me, for I will go without force," she said, sadly, though she tried to keep up her spirits.

Placing himself by her side and taking one bridle-rein, Fuentes led the way, his Redskin Ropers following, the messenger bringing up the rear.

They went toward the coast, and at a rapid canter, for night was coming on.

The moon lighted their way, however, after nightfall, and within three hours they began to descend the hills to the coast.

Straight to the sandy shore they went, where a light surf was breaking upon the beach.

A boat was now seen coming inshore, and in it were two men.

From her saddle, as her horse stood in the water up to his saddle-girths, Lulita got into the boat, the chief and the messenger following her.

The Indians continued on down the coast in the water, while the boat, beyond the surf moved along the shore.

Thus a mile was passed over and they came to an inlet into which the soldiers and the boat turned.

Another mile inland the boat landed on the sandy beach, and Lulita stood waiting while the chief paid the boatmen for their services.

Lulita watched all that happened and was convinced that Fuentes had secured the services of the boatmen, for a small fishing sloop lay at anchor in the mouth of the inlet.

Back to the sloop the boat rowed, while again mounting their horses the party held on along the sandy shore until they came to a cliff jutting out into the waters.

In this cliff was a vast crevice, as though it had split apart, and boldly into it the chief rode, Lulita following and the Redskin Ropers bringing up the rear.

Once in the crevice and the chief struck a match and lighted a lantern which he had taken from a shelf of rock.

"Now, señorita, you will keep close behind me, for this is a cavern into which a tunnel has been cut from the old Mission on the hill-top."

"The tide is out now so that we gained easy access, but when it comes in all traces of our trail will be washed away, and those who pursue us will never know where we left the sea."

"The old ruin has some comfortable quarters in it, and you shall be well cared for, I assure you."

"Keep close behind me now and I will lead the way."

Lulita made no reply, but followed the chief with his lantern, and after a ride of five minutes through the tunnel they came out into an arched chamber, where the horses were left.

A stone stairway led from this to rooms overhead, and to her surprise the maiden found herself in quarters which were by no means uncomfortable.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SEARCH.

WHEN the Ranchero Vigilantes met with Señor Samos and his cowboys, the story of the kidnapping of Lulita was told in full, and just how the trail had been lost at the sea-shore.

But as the Ranchero Vigilantes wished to follow the trail for themselves the Señor Samos led the way to the spot where the messenger had joined the horsemen who were awaiting for him and the kidnapped girl.

The trail was now nearly a week old, but it was taken up and followed to the coast.

Señor Samos had sent to his hacienda for provisions, and so the party camped at night upon the coast.

With the morning they all set to work to solve the mystery of how it was that the trail of twenty-three horses ended in the sea.

The men scattered themselves up and down the coast, and the search was most thorough, yet without result.

At night when all met in the camp the fruitless search was discussed, and not one could agree upon any explanation for the lost trail.

Of course all had decided that the kidnappers had ridden in the sea up or down the coast, to destroy their trail.

But where had they gone?

Down the coast a mile there was an inlet, deep and wide, and no horse could cross it that was certain even at slack tide, as there were rocks that made wild breakers in the center.

Upon the only shore of the inlet that a horse could follow, a barrier came where a cliff jutting out into the waters, and beyond was a rocky barrier.

Several men had gone to the point of this cliff and found a crevice, but it was a mere split in the rock, they said, and as the tide was well up there was no place of refuge within.

That was the report in that direction.

Up the coast the sandy shore ran for a league or more, and then there was a cliff straight as a wall and very high, against which the sea broke furiously even at low tide.

Had any trail led back from the shore, between those cliffs and the point in the inlet, it would have been readily discovered in the dry sand.

The camp of the searchers was upon a hill, near an old ruin which stood upon the spur of a range ending abruptly at the coast.

Along the range was the only visible access to the ruin, which had once been an old Spanish Mission.

When deserted, for reasons never known to the present generation, it was said, or there was a legend to that effect, that the ruin had been the haunt of a pirate of the Pacific who had gained entrance there by running his vessel close in to the cliff, and thus, from the yards, reaching the rocks.

Whether this was true or not, no one had ever had the temerity to search in the old ruin for treasure with the piratical stamp upon it.

The ridge-road to it led in through an arch in the wall, and entered a plaza an acre in size.

Around this the structure had been built, a chapel and rooms, stable and store-rooms.

But it appeared to have caved in here and there, and if there was any place of refuge there, none of the searchers could discover it.

Then, too, for the kidnappers to have gone to the coast and then made a back trail to the old Mission would have caused them to travel many miles, and certainly their tracks would have been visible.

So, after a search of the ruins, all gave up that there was no hiding-place there for anything save coyotes and owls.

Yet Señor Samos remembered that it was to this old ruin that Fuentes had taken his daughter before, when she was rescued by Marlo, and he could hardly force himself away from the spot.

At last it was determined to leave the camp on the coast, as no clue could be found to the mysterious disappearance, and all decided that perhaps after all the best place to search for the missing maiden was the Haunted Hacienda.

"That was his home, and it is said that there are many secret recesses in the old place where a troop of cavalry can hide."

"Why should he not go there?" asked a ranchero.

"We went there first, and found nothing."

"No suspicious signs, señor?"

"Not one."

"Who dwells there now?"

"Two servants, a fine-looking fellow by the name of Carlos, who was Fuentes's cowboy chief, and his wife, a really beautiful woman by the name of El Cinto, also a Mexican," answered Señor Samos.

"But he has some cowboys there, señor," said one of the Samos ranchmen.

"Yes, a few."

"He has four, señor, and they live at the Herders' Camp, some miles from the Haunted Hacienda."

"Well, we can go there and see them."

"They are all Mexicans, señor," said the man in a significant tone, as though to convey the meaning that, being Mexicans, they were to be suspected.

"Did you find the man and his wife knew nothing of the affair, señor?" asked the ranchero who had just spoken of the Haunted Hacienda.

"Nothing, and I am convinced they are innocent."

"Well, we can look them over again, and start to-night."

As the words were uttered, a horseman was seen coming at a canter toward the camp.

It was Carlos of the Haunted Hacienda.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CARLOS HAS A THEORY.

THE horseman, as he came toward the camp on the coast, was recognized at once by Señor Samos and others of the searchers.

He was well mounted, rode a silver-ornamented saddle and bridle, and was dressed in fringed leggings of buckskin, top-boots, silver spurs, a silk shirt and velvet jacket, the latter adorned with buttons and braid.

Upon his head was a sombrero, in the front of which was embroidered the United States flag, in spite of his being a Mexican by birth.

"Señor Samos, I hope you have some tidings of your daughter," he said, in a pleasant way, after he had dismounted.

"None whatever, Señor Carlos."

"We are more at a loss than ever to find some clue of her, and yet all that has been done by my kind friends here has been useless," was the mournful response of the ranchero.

"I had a talk with my herders, and they could suggest nothing, but I came to offer my services to you in the search."

"I am glad that you have come, Señor Carlos, for, to be frank with you, we were going to-night to the Haunted Hacienda to search it."

Carlos did not change color, but with a smile, and with no show of indignation, answered, while every eye was upon him:

"It is but natural, Señor Samos, for you to feel suspicious of all connected with the Haunted Hacienda, and I do not blame you for it."

"But you may remember that Señor Fuentes was clever enough never to let his right hand know what his left did, or in other words he lived as a gentleman at the hacienda, and secretly led a band of outlaws who had a retreat far away toward the coast."

"That is true."

"When he was superseded by the man Marlo, I had the same confidence in the latter that you had, and it was a surprise for me to find out that he was such a black villain, as we learned his career from the officer who came to the hacienda."

"Marlo, too, led a double life, as you know."

"Then came out the capture, by the sailors, and the clever escape of Señor Fuentes, who sought a hiding-place in the hacienda, which he knew perfectly."

"Now, since the Señor Fuentes left the hacienda I have not seen him, though I am sure that he must be the leader of the Redskin Road-Agents, and also the kidnapper of your daughter."

"You are sure of this?"

The question was earnestly asked by Señor Samos.

"I feel certain that he is."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Well, señor, it was Fuentes who got that band of redskins together to carry out his revenge upon Marlo."

"When they were set free, to return to their camps, I employed them as herders until I went away and secured the men I now have."

"Then I let them go."

"And then?"

"It was not very long after that I heard tales of robberies being committed by Redskin Road-Agents, led by a chief who spoke perfect English and Spanish."

"Señor Fuentes does both."

"Yes."

"Why, then, being a fugitive without means, should not Fuentes again seek his Redskin Ropers and take the trail to hold up coaches and rob ranches?"

"That is true, Señor Carlos."

"The Redskin Ropers certainly had nothing against you or your daughter, and I feel assured that she was kidnapped by the Señor Fuentes."

"I can believe nothing else; but where has he taken her?"

"You followed the trail from your ranch, señor?"

"Yes."

"Where did it lead?"

"To the beach yonder, into the sea."

"You are sure she went along?"

"The tracks of her horse joined others in waiting and they led into the sea."

"And came out elsewhere up or down the coast?"

"Where?"

"Is there no trail?"

"None, and we have gone as far each way as we could go, or any one else on foot or horseback," and Señor Samos explained the exact situation at the cliffs and the rocky point in the inlet.

"This is strange indeed, and it must be that they could not have come back upon the coast."

for you have men with you who have no superior as trailers."

"Yes, and all are at fault."

"Then they could not have come back to the shore."

"What else could they have done?"

"Have you thought of a boat?"

"Ah!"

The exclamation came from a score of lips.

"If Señor Fuentes planned to kidnap the Señorita Samos, he planned to cover up his tracks, and there is no doubt but that he had a boat here to meet the party."

"That is my theory," said Carlos impressively.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNDER SUSPICION.

THE theory offered by Carlos of the Haunted Hacienda at once had backers.

"Yes, he went in a boat."

"He had a boat here to meet him," was the decision expressed by several.

But Ranchero Rafael, a young man who was captain of the Vigilante party, asked:

"What kind of a boat, Señor Carlos?"

"That I do not know."

"How could they get a boat near enough in-shore to embark on?"

"They could take the people off in a row-boat."

"True; but there would yet remain the horses."

"Yes, but they would sacrifice them."

"If left they would return to the shore and we would find their trails."

"Yes, but they would not leave them."

"They certainly could not get them upon a boat," urged the Vigilante captain.

"No, but they could knife them, tow the bodies off-shore and let them drift away with the tide, while the people ran up or down the coast in the craft that met them."

This second theory was applauded.

Carlos had made a hit, and even the Vigilante captain admitted that the Haunted Hacienda ranchman might have struck a solution of the mysterious disappearance of the party at the sea-shore.

The matter was then discussed in all its bearings, and nearly every one agreed that they could see no other way to account for the lost trail, except by the use of a boat for the people, and the carrying the bodies of the horses out to sea.

"But where has he taken my child?" asked the despairing father.

"Señor, the motive can only be for ransom, and you will soon hear from Señor Fuentes, beyond a doubt."

"Why do you speak of such a man as Señor Fuentes?" asked the Vigilante captain.

"Because, señor, it is from habit, as the Señor Fuentes was my employer, you must remember."

"Why do you think, then, that this Fuentes will soon let the Señor Samos hear from him?"

It was very evident that the Vigilante captain was suspicious of Carlos.

"I can see no other motive for the kidnapping the Señorita Samos than for ransom, and when Fuentes, if that pleases you, señor, is in a place of safety himself, he will seek to make terms with the one to pay the gold for his captive's release."

"At least such is my humble opinion."

"I think the Señor Carlos is right, captain, and my best plan would be to offer a reward for information regarding my daughter, for the body of Fuentes, dead or alive, and any word that can lead to her rescue, or the capture of her kidnapper."

"I will do this at once, for I can see no reason for remaining here longer, and thereby keeping all of you delayed on my account, from your kindness to me."

"This I will do, señores."

"One moment, Señor Samos?" said the Vigilantes' commander.

"Yes, señor."

"I may wrong Señor Carlos, and if so I am sorry for it; but I cannot bring myself to the belief that he, as the cowboy chief of Fuentes, living on his ranch with him for a long while, does not know more of the man than he admits."

"He comes to us with a very plausible theory for the lost trail, I agree, and his idea of ransom is all right; but may he not know just what has occurred, and may it not be that he is feeling his way as the go-between of Fuentes and yourself?"

The words of the Vigilante captain evidently made an impression.

Every eye was turned upon Carlos.

His face did not change color.

He even smiled serenely. As he seemed to be expected to speak, he said, with no show of indignation:

"I do not wonder that you distrust me, señor, for I admit that my position is a suspicious one."

"But, after the visit of Señor Samos to the Haunted Hacienda, my wife and I had a talk over this latest act of our former employer, and we argued for our own sakes, it was best for me to lend my aid to the searchers for the Señorita Samos."

"The owner of the Haunted Hacienda ranch and cattle I admit is the Señor Fuentes."

"He is at present a fugitive from justice, an outlaw, the kidnapper in my opinion of this gentleman's daughter, while I am in charge of his property."

"If he does not return, I retain control until the law sends me off."

"If he is captured and hanged, as he deserves to be, then I still hold my place until the law ousts me."

"Until then I am secure of a living on the ranch, and if I leave I shall still be able to take care of my wife and myself without having to turn my hand against my fellow-man to do so."

"I have no other explanation to make, even to you, Señor Vigilante."

The words were uttered with cool dignity, and all seemed to think Carlos had made a point in his favor.

But the captain said:

"One moment, please."

"Yes?"

"If this outlaw communicates through you to the Señor Samos his wishes regarding the Señorita Samos, you will consider it your duty to at once betray him into the hands of those who should punish him."

"You are wrong, for I would betray no man who placed his life in my hands, though I would do all for the release of the señorita in my power."

"Señor Samos?"

"Yes, Captain Rafael."

"This man is, I am sure, in league with Fuentes, and I advise that we make him a prisoner and then march upon the Haunted Hacienda," said the Vigilante captain.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WOMAN AT BAY.

CARLOS was considerably taken aback at the turn affairs had taken.

To resist would be worse than madness, and so he calmly surrendered with the remark:

"I surrender, Señor Captain, but upon one condition."

"Name it."

"I shall demand of you personally satisfaction if you search the hacienda and find no clue to Fuentes, nothing to convict me of playing a double game in this matter."

"I accept your challenge, Señor Carlos, and agree to your terms; but we are to be the judges, when we make the search, as to your guilt or innocence."

"So be it, señor, and when you fail to convict, then you are to answer for your determined course to cast an insult in my teeth."

"I am," was the indifferent answer of the Vigilante captain.

Señor Samos was anxious not to have this feeling of the young ranchero against Carlos to be pushed too far, so he said:

"I think, Señor Captain, you will find Señor Carlos had not acted in the interest of Fuentes in this matter, his misfortune being to have served that man."

"We shall see, señor."

"And when we do I trust that you will be willing to acknowledge that you have wronged the Señor Carlos."

"I will act only according to the dictates of what I deem right or wrong."

"I suspect this man, and if I find no clue to connect him with this man Fuentes, I shall not hold him prisoner, for he will be free to go."

"But I shall consider it his good fortune that enables him to escape, for still will I believe him guilty, and more, I am responsible to him as pledged, if he considers himself insulted by my suspicion and words."

The Señor Samos said no more, for he saw that the Vigilante was determined to connect Carlos with Fuentes, and the others had also begun to regard him with suspicion.

The party then broke up camp and took up the march for the Haunted Hacienda.

Carlos was secretly bound, his hands being

made fast to the horn of his saddle and his feet being tied under the girth.

Señor Samos had urged that this need not be, but Ranchero Rafael had said there should be no chance of escape.

On through the bright moonlight they rode, and toward midnight came near the Haunted Hacienda.

All was quiet there, and as they reached the gate Carlos said:

"I will give the signal so that there will be no delay, and my wife will admit us."

"No, you will simply give warning, so remain quiet."

"I will call."

The Vigilante then gave orders to oblique right and left and entirely surround the hacienda, thus camping until dawn.

The order was obeyed, and the Vigilante captain, his prisoner, Señor Samos, and a dozen of the cowboys rode up to the gate.

Calling aloud, an answer came from the hacienda, and soon a woman's form advanced from the hacienda toward the wall.

She looked through a small window, and asked:

"Who is there?"

"Open the gate, El Cinto, for there are some gentlemen with me," said Carlos.

But her quick eyes had detected that her husband was bound, and she disappeared from the little window, closing it after her.

A moment after a narrow door in the massive, iron-studded gates was thrown open, and El Cinto stepped out with a revolver in each hand.

"Why are you bound, Carlos?" she asked, sternly.

"My good offices to the searchers of the Señorita Samos were misunderstood, El Cinto, for I was suspected of being in league with Fuentes, and I was made a prisoner and brought here while they search the hacienda."

"You suspected of harboring Fuentes, a man who has made war upon that beautiful young lady, señorita, whom a wolf would not harm?"

"And this is the return for your going to aid in her rescue?"

And the woman spoke in a tone of indignation and anger.

"A pretty piece of acting, señora, but your husband I do suspect, and as birds of a feather flock together, you are doubtless guilty with him," was the curt reply of the ranchero captain.

"Oh, Señor Captain, do not visit your anger upon the señora," urged the Señor Samos, while Carlos said:

"Señor Captain, this quarrel is between you and I, and it is cowardly to attack a woman."

"I'll make all answer when I am satisfied you are not both guilty."

"Now I intend to search this old rookery from one end to the other, from cellar to roof."

"Open that gate, woman!"

But the ranchero was trying harsh methods with the wrong woman, for in an instant El Cinto had him covered with her revolver, while she cried:

"Señor Captain, you may search the Haunted Hacienda, yes, but not until you set Carlos Canova free."

"Set him at liberty within the moment or I will send a bullet into your heart!"

Captain Rafael was taken completely by surprise by the sudden turning of the woman at bay.

He knew not what to say, and a silence fell upon all, while El Cinto called out:

"Obey, or I fire!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

WITHOUT SATISFACTION.

THAT El Cinto intended to keep her word no one knew better than Ranchero Rafael who gazed straight into her face and saw determination upon every feature.

He disliked to back down after all he had done, and especially before a woman, and yet he felt he was throwing his life away, for there was not the slightest tremor in the hand that held the revolver, the muzzle of which was not more than seven feet from his breast.

As for Carlos, he sat an instant in silence and then said:

"Back down, Señor Captain, if you value life, for she will keep her word."

At this moment Señor Samos interfered.

"One moment please, señora?"

"Well, Señor Samos?"

"If we release your husband you will consent that Captain Rafael shall search the ruin?"

"Yes, señor, throughout."

"Then, Captain Rafael, let us release the Señor Carlos and begin the search."

"The search must be made by daylight."

"Release my husband or die!" came in startlingly thrilling tones from El Cinto.

"I will yield to your wish, Señor Samos," said the rancho captain, and he gave an order for the release of Carlos, and quickly, for he saw that his life hung on the whim of a woman.

As soon as Carlos was free he said:

"Señor Samos, I will invite you and your friends to share the hospitality of the hacienda for the balance of the night, if you will."

"This is but a dodge to escape and—"

"Silence, sir!" thundered Carlos, and in a changed tone he turned from the rancho captain to the Señor Samos and continued:

"To prove my innocence, señor, to you, for what this man thinks I do not care, I will remain in your presence until after the hacienda has been thoroughly searched in the morning."

"Your men are surrounding it, and there is no chance for the escape for any one from these walls."

"Will you enter, please, and your angry friend is also included?"

"I am sorry for this suspicion of you, Señor Carlos, for I have not felt that it was just; but I will avail myself of your hospitality," Señor Samos said.

"I will remain without with my men, Señor Samos, and keep a watchful eye that no one leaves the hacienda, and I advise you to keep that man, and the woman too, under watch," the rancho captain said.

With this Señor Samos and several of his cowboys entered the gates and were made comfortable in the quarters of Carlos and his wife.

Carlos kept right in the presence of the señor constantly, and when dawn came the latter was able to say that the keeper of the hacienda had not left the room.

After having set breakfast before her guests, El Cinto said:

"Now, señor, I will open the gates and admit the searchers."

"Where are your men, señor?" asked Señor Samos.

"If you mean the cowboys, they are at their camp, señor, several miles distant."

"There are four of them."

"And who else occupies this hacienda with you?"

"My husband."

"No one else?"

"Not a soul."

"Do you mean that you remained here alone, while your husband went to our camp?"

"All alone, señor, why not?"

"Were you not afraid?"

"Of what, señor?"

"It is said that the place is haunted by tearful memories of the past."

"I have seen no ghosts, señor, and I fear nothing."

"I can protect myself."

"I believe you," muttered the rancho.

Then he walked out to the gate with Carlos, and the gates were thrown open.

Señor Rafael was there and in anything but a pleasant humor, for he spoke very curtly to Señor Samos.

"At last we are permitted to enter?"

"Yes, señor, and I advise you to keep a civil tongue while you are here, for I am master here," was the quick reply of Carlos.

"We will settle our affair later, sir."

"Yes, at your own sweet will, so that you do not wish to postpone it until another day."

The Señor Samos again came in to prevent trouble and urged that the hacienda be searched at once and by two separate parties, of six men each.

This was agreed to and the men set to work, Captain Rafael going with one party and urging them on to their best efforts.

Thus the morning passed away and nothing had been found of a suspicious nature.

A squad had been sent for to bring in the cowboys of the ranch, and all of them came.

They were closely questioned by Captain Rafael but did not commit themselves to any knowledge to convict them of being in the pay of Fuentes.

They knew only Carlos as their employer, and had never seen any one else about the ranch.

El Cinto had dinner ready for the searchers, and after the meal they again began the task of hunting for Fuentes and his captive.

But in vain the search, for though secret hiding-places were unearthed, they appeared never to have held occupants.

At last even the rancho captain was willing to give up, and said:

"Well, Señor Samos, we have done our duty."

"Then I hope you are satisfied, señor, that you wronged our friends here?"

"I cannot say that I am, señor," was the reply.

"Nor am I satisfied, Captain Rafael, for now you have to answer to me for the insults cast upon my wife and myself," came in the stern voice of the keeper of the Haunted Hacienda.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SATISFACTION.

IN vain was it that Señor Samos sought to pour oil upon the troubled waters, and cause a treaty of peace to be patched up between Rafael, the rancho captain, and Carlos Canova, the keeper of the Haunted Hacienda.

Carlos was now in no mood for trifling.

He had kept his compact, and was determined now that Rafael should stand by his.

Failing in his endeavors, Señor Samos appealed to others, those who had come with the captain.

They did all in their power to have the quarrel settled amicably, but Carlos was determined, and would now only hear of a meeting between himself and the rancho captain.

The latter had toned down a little, yet was ready, he said, to keep his compact, if Señor Carlos demanded satisfaction.

"I do demand satisfaction, señor, for when I went to serve you I was insulted."

"When I agreed to be made a prisoner on certain terms, you accepted, and I came bound here to my home."

"You backed down in face of my wife, but insulted her, though I was released."

"Now, after the insults flung in our teeth, you are willing to break your compact, and I say that you are a coward."

Whatever feeling the rancho captain had had before in the matter, the last words of Carlos stung him to the quick, and he said savagely:

"I have broken no compact and I will meet you."

"Well said, señor, I am glad to find I was mistaken in my estimate of you, so retract the word coward I flung at you."

"Pray mention to some friend your weapons and terms of the meeting, and I will name mine."

Señor Samos now appealed to the wife of Carlos to prevent the meeting, but she said quietly:

"No, señor, the quarrel was not of my husband's seeking, and both of us have been insulted and accused of the gravest of acts toward you."

"My husband will wipe out the insults, or fall in the attempt."

Señor Samos sighed, and Rafael, the rancho captain, said:

"Señor Samos, I ask your good offices in this affair as my friend."

Señor Samos would gladly have gotten out of the affair; but he could not well refuse one who had led a party to the rescue of his daughter, and more, had gotten into the difficulty with Carlos from having been over-zealous in his desire to find Lulita.

So he said:

"I will serve you, Señor Captain, as you ask it."

"Thanks, señor, and if my enemy will name his second, matters can soon be arranged."

"My wife will serve me," was the quiet response of Carlos, and El Cinto calmly stepped forward and remarked:

"I am ready, Señor Samos."

"May I ask what weapons your principal prefers?"

This cool way of putting it caused Señor Samos to quickly say:

"Can it be possible, señor, that you would have your wife witness this duel?"

"Certainly, señor."

"And act as your second?"

"Why not, Señor Samos? for certainly she feels the deepest interest in me of any one here, or elsewhere, for that matter."

Señor Samos sighed, but said:

"You know best."

"Señora, I am at your service."

"And the weapons your principal prefers, señor? for as the challenged party he has the right to select."

"What is your choice, Captain Rafael?"

And Señor Samos turned to the captain, who said, indifferently:

"Rifles, or revolvers—it is a matter of indifference to me."

Then he quickly added:

"Let it be a duel on horseback, one revolver each, to be stationed across the Plaza, at the word charging forward and firing at will."

"That will suit us," quietly said El Cinto, and she added:

"We will load the weapons now, Señor Samos, and toss for the word."

This was done, El Cinto showing that she was well versed in the use of fire-arms, and when the "toss" was made she won the word.

Carlos got his finest horse, mounted and rode to position, while he told El Cinto to offer the captain a fresh mount, an offer which was promptly refused with the insulting remark:

"He would mount me on some animal that I would have all I could do to ride, and never be able to fire from."

So the captain mounted on his own horse, and the two duelists went to the positions selected for them by their seconds.

They were to ride from wing to wing of the hacienda, a distance of a hundred yards across the Plaza.

A line was drawn fifty feet from each position, and here the seconds stood, and once over this they could begin firing.

The rancheros, cowboys and the party of four from the Haunted Hacienda all took up positions to see this novel duel, and among them all El Cinto was about the coolest in appearance, whatever she might inwardly suffer.

When she gave the word her voice rung out as clear as a flute:

"Are you ready?"

Both men nodded, and then came the word:

"Go!"

The horses bounded forward at the word, and as the two men rode like a flash by the two seconds, the woman and the man, each duelist fired when across the line.

Their revolvers flashed together, and both bullets found targets.

The bullet from Rancho Rafael's revolver buried itself in the brain of Carlos's horse.

The bullet fired by Carlos sunk into the forehead of the rancho captain.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LAST RESORT.

WHEN the horse of Carlos fell dead beneath him, the athletic rider caught nimbly upon his feet, and, as though perfectly sure of his aim, turned and bent over the fallen animal as if in pity for him.

In the mean time the rancho captain had fallen heavily to the ground, and when his friends rushed to his side they found that he was dead.

The bullet had entered the very center of his forehead, and he had been instantly killed.

"Poor fellow, he brought it upon himself," said one.

"Yes, I feared that he would push Señor Carlos beyond all bounds," Señor Samos remarked.

"Poor captain! He was a good, brave fellow, but allowed his temper to better him time and again."

"I knew that some day his temper would carry him beyond all bounds."

"Where shall we bury him?"

"Here at the hacienda."

"It might be unpleasant for the Señor Carlos," said Señor Samos, joining in the conversation with the others.

The words caught the ear of Carlos, who said quickly, as he came forward:

"Not in the least, señor, and with the old padres buried in the hacienda cemetery he will rest in the midst of good company."

El Cinto at once said she knew of several coffins in one of the cells, one of which might be used, and so preparations were at once begun to bury the unfortunate rancho, Carlos lending a helping hand.

At last the preparations were made, the body was placed in one of the long-unused coffins, and the men bore it to the little chapel cemetery, where a grave had been already dug.

With only a prayer, uttered by Señor Samos over his remains, the rancho was consigned to the grave, Carlos and El Cinto standing near with uncovered heads.

If there was any feeling toward Carlos, among the friends of the dead man it was not shown, and after the burial the party mounted their horses and prepared to return to their homes, as Señor Samos said it would do no good to make further search, and he would let it be known that he would give a most liberal reward for any information leading to the recovery of his daughter.

ter, and double the amount for the capture, or death of her captor.

So the horsemen divided there at the Haunted Hacienda, the ranchmen going northward, the four cowboys under Carlos to their camp, with greatly increased respect for their employer and his wife, and the Señor Samos and his men back to their ranch.

Before leaving, the Señor Samos grasped the hand of both Carlos and his wife, and said:

"I cannot believe that either of you would deceive me, and I trust you.

"If you can gain any clue of my child, come to me."

Then he departed and late in the night returned to his desolate home.

He had a lingering hope that he might, upon arrival there, find that Lulita had returned.

But he was doomed to disappointment as old Edwina met him at the door and cried out excitedly:

"Oh, señor! have you got the señorita?"

"Alas, no, Edwina; but I still hope almost against hope.

"I have done all that could be done, and now must wait until her kidnappers show their hand.

"Then my whole fortune will I give for her release."

The next day messengers were dispatched to all quarters to post the offer of rewards.

They were to place it where the trails crossed, at the different ranches, the settlements, and wherever they would catch the eye.

The day following Carlos appeared at the hacienda and was greeted by the señor with anxious face.

"Señor Samos, I have come to ask you to give me several of those papers, offering a reward, for I wish to post them at your late camp on the coast, at the old Mission on the ridge, and at the Cross Trails, for, as the kidnappers went that way, perhaps they may return from the same direction."

"You are right, Señor Carlos, and you shall have the placards."

"And, señor, it might be well to send a couple of your men up and down the coast for a long distance, for the vessel must have made a landing as near as possible from the starting-place."

"I will do so, Señor Carlos, and I thank you."

After taking dinner with Señor Samos, Carlos rode away toward the coast.

It was not by the orders of Señor Samos, but he was followed, and by two of the ranch cowboys.

The next day they came and reported to the señor that Carlos had gone to the coast and faithfully posted the placards at the camp, on the shore, and at the old Mission.

Then he had gone on the trail for the Haunted Hacienda.

"I feel that he is true," was the comment of Señor Samos, and the story told by the two cowboys who had tracked him, caused the others to think that he had been misjudged wholly by the ranchero captain.

CHAPTER XXX.

A RESCUER.

A MONTH after the rewards offered by Señor Samos were posted, a vessel was steaming slowly down the coast and close in-shore.

The moon was again at its full, and the sea was as placid as a lake, for only a balmy breeze fanned its bosom.

The moon was again at its full and lighted up land and water with its glorious light.

"I will drop anchor here, Mr. Roy, for this is about the nearest place to land to reach the hacienda, and I will try and make an early start, for it will be a long tramp.

"But I have a desire to see that old ruined Mission by moonlight, so will go ashore for a row and walk."

"I will call away a boat at once, sir."

"Oh, no, I will row myself in the gig, as the exercise will do me good."

The speaker was Captain Edgar Yerger, and he stood upon the deck of the trim cutter Rush, his own vessel.

He was soon in the gig and rowing ashore.

The tide was against him, but he pulled a good oar, and entering the inlet was rowing on to as near a landing-place as possible.

At last he turned his boat, and steadying it with the oar, gazed up at the ruined old Mission.

To his surprise he beheld a light in the sea wing.

"What does that mean?" he asked himself.

There was no doubt about it, for a light it certainly was.

As he looked the light disappeared.

"Well, if the old place is the abode of ghosts what do they want with lights with such a moon?" he said in a jocular vein.

"Well, I will go closer in and see what it means.

"By Neptune's head! but it may be a smuggler's haunt.

"I am glad I came ashore."

He pulled in close under the shadow of the jutting rock, and on beyond in the channel now maneuvering with the out-going tide.

He was about to see if he could land when suddenly he beheld ride out of the solid rock, it seemed, a horseman.

He was under the shadow of an overhanging tree, so not readily visible, and he kept motionless, grasping hold of a branch to keep his boat from floating away.

As he looked another horse and rider came in sight, and he beheld the flash of a light from within the rock, glimmering across the water.

"By Heaven! that is a woman!" he said, alluding to the second rider.

As he gazed a third rider came into view, and he muttered:

"The first and third are Indians, the middle one is a woman.

"That shows she is a captive, so I have a chance to act here."

He saw that the outgoing tide had left the sands bare about the rock, and knew that there was some opening there, only to be entered or left at low tide.

The two Indians and their captive rode close along the shore, on the sands, while the officer ran his boat across the inlet, pulled it upon the sands, and hastily sped after the three riders, who were now a short distance ahead.

He had observed that the inlet wound around a point there, and he clambered up the rocks and cut across.

He was just in time to see the three appear.

One glance then showed him that the woman was bound, her hands tied behind her, and as the moonlight streamed into her face he recognized her.

Instantly he threw his revolver forward and fired at the Indian in the rear.

From his saddle he dropped at the flash of the revolver, and a second shot, as he sprung from cover, brought down the horse of the Indian nearest to him.

With a bound the officer was upon the surprised and fallen Indian, and a death-struggle was begun.

Both were powerful men, but as the Indian refused to obey the command to surrender, the officer used his revolver, and the shot ended the struggle.

"Captain Yerger, it is you?"

"Yes, Señorita Samos," said the panting rescuer.

"Are you, hurt, señor?"

"Not in the least, señorita."

"Then, señor, catch that man's horse, and we must fly from here for our lives, for there are comrades of these men in the old Mission, and they will come to the rescue, for they have heard the shots."

In response the captain raised his voice and sent it ringing out over the waters:

"Ho, the cutter ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, sir," came back the reply.

"Send two boats' crews ashore armed!"

"Ay, ay, sir! They are on the way, for I heard the shots," was the response.

"Bravo, my brave Roy," cried Captain Yerger, and as he spoke there came a wild war-cry from toward the old Mission.

It was answered at once by the crews of the coming boats, and Captain Yerger said:

"That will keep them off, señorita; now tell me how it is I find you here a prisoner?"

"I have been the captive of Fuentes, the outlaw ranchero, for long weeks, Señor Captain."

"His captive?"

"Yes, Captain Yerger, for I was captured and taken to yonder ruin.

"He gave me six weeks to decide whether I would become his wife, or be put to death, and the time was up to-morrow.

"He is away, but is expected back to-night, and the old ruin is where I have been held a captive.

"My quarters were not uncomfortable; he was not unkind to me; he gave me clothes and food, and yet I was a close-kept prisoner.

"To-night one of his redskin messengers came to take me away, as Fuentes sent word that he feared my hiding-place was known; so I was to be carried elsewhere by those two redskin rob-

bers whom you killed. The others were to await the coming of Fuentes and then follow.

"Ah, señor, from what have you not rescued me?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

HOME AGAIN!

THE boats grounded upon the shore as Lulita ceased speaking. At the same moment Captain Yerger had freed her from her bonds and lifted her from her saddle.

"Señorita, I shall ask you to guide us back to the ruin far enough to tell us how to gain entrance," said the captain.

"I will gladly do so, Captain Yerger, but you will find the Redskin Road-Agents gone, as they can escape by the ridge, for they must have seen your vessel and boats.

"Had they not done so they would have come ere this to the aid of their two comrades."

"We can at least try to find them, señorita, so mount your horse again and lead the way!"

This Lulita did and the party went at a double quick back to the rocky point.

Into the crevice rode Lulita and there the lantern still was burning.

The captain now went ahead with his men, and in a few minutes had entered the upper chambers of the ruin, dashing in with a cheer.

But, the cheer rung through empty walls, for, as the Señorita Lulita had said, the Redskin Road-Agents had escaped by way of the ridge, the way having been cleverly hidden under a mass of vines.

"Well, Señor Captain, as this has so long been my abiding-place, I will have to ask you to make yourself at home in the old ruin," said Lulita, who had followed the sailors into the ruined chapel.

"No, señorita, not if you can stand the ride to your home, for it is a beautiful night, and I can accompany you upon the horse of one of your Indian guards, for I had run down the coast to make a call upon your father and yourself, and was to start on my tramp to the hacienda in the morning, but fortunately came ashore to view the old ruin by midnight, and I like the view better than I thought I would."

Lulita laughed at the conceit and expressed her willingness to start home at once.

"All right, señorita, we will return to the beach and start from there.

"Mr. Roy, I will leave you to bury the two redskins and hold the Mission until my return.

"It is just possible that you may, by keeping a bright watch, find the chief of the Redskin Robbers walk into your clutches."

"I shall keep a bright watch for him, Captain Yerger," said the lieutenant, and he placed men on the ridge, while with others he went to where the Indians had fallen.

Captain Yerger aided Lulita to mount, and springing into the saddle of the horse of one of the Indians he placed himself by her side, and they started on their way for the hacienda, Lulita acting as guide.

On the way Captain Yerger told Lulita of the death of Marlo, for he knew not to the contrary, and that she need never fear him more.

It was a ride from the beach much further than it would have been from the old Mission along the ridge, as the nature of the country caused them to make a wide detour.

Then, too, neither seemed to care to ride rapidly, and just as the sun rose above the hills, the Samos Hacienda came in sight.

Señor Samos was walking up and down the piazza, his hands behind his back, and peering now and then over the wall about the hacienda, far out over the country.

He did not sleep much at night, and ate only enough to keep him alive, so he had become thin and haggard.

Suddenly his eyes fell upon the two riders, and he thought they were his cowboys.

But a second glance caused him to grasp his spyglass from where he kept it, and level it upon them.

"My God! it is my child!" he gasped.

For a moment, then, he was too weak to move or utter a word.

But soon he gained his voice and strength, and called loudly for Edwina, while he ran like a boy across the grounds to the gate in the adobe wall.

As he flung open the gate Lulita dashed up, and threw herself from her saddle.

"Father!"

"My child!"

It was all that was said, and the maiden was clasped in her father's arms.

It was some moments before either spoke, and then Lulita told her father all, of her capture, imprisonment, and rescue by Captain Yerger.

"God forever bless you, señor," said the ranchero, with trembling voice, and then he led the way into the hacienda, where the servants came with a rush to welcome home their young mistress.

"And this man Fuentes is still at large?" said the ranchero, sadly.

"He is, Señor Samos, but must be hunted down," was Captain Yerger's response.

"Yes, he must be hunted down, for I will give ten thousand dollars for his scalp, dead or alive," was the almost savage rejoinder of the ranchero.

Lulita had now gone to her long-deserted room, to make her toilet, and half an hour after the maiden sat down with her father and her rescuer to breakfast, the ranchero remarking:

"This is the first time I have been hungry since I last saw you, my child."

"Now I am happy again."

"No, father, there is no happiness for us until Fuentes is in his grave," was the low response of the maiden, and it showed how much she dreaded the man while still at large.

CHAPTER XXXII. THE REWARD.

It was the day of Lulita's return to her home, when near sunset a horseman was seen approaching the hacienda.

As he drew near he was seen to wear a beard, which with his hair was long and unkempt.

His clothes too were torn and much the worse for wear, though it was a sailor costume, while a tarpaulin sheltered his head.

He was bent in form and limped as he dismounted and came toward the piazza where Señor Samos sat conversing with Captain Yerger, for Lulita was enjoying an afternoon siesta in her room, as she was much prostrated now that she was home again.

"Well, my man, you seem needy and suffering?" said Señor Samos kindly.

"I am, señor, a poor man, but I hope not to be long, for I have come to tell you news," and the man spoke English with a strong foreign accent.

"Well, out with it."

"I have read on placards that you have offered ten thousand dollars for the capture of Marco Fuentes."

"I have."

"Would you give as much for his dead body?"

"I will gladly do so."

"You know him?"

"But too well."

"Will you ride with me to a spot near the old Mission?"

"Why?"

"I will show you the body of Fuentes."

"Heaven be praised!"

"If you can do this I will give you a draft on my bankers in San Francisco for double the amount."

"I can show you his body, señor."

"We will go with you; but it seems that I have met you before?"

"No, señor, I am a sailor, and in hard luck."

"I saw your reward and knowing Fuentes, I left my ship at San Diego and started upon his trail."

"See! that is his horse I ride, and when dying he told me the way to your hacienda and told me to ask you to forgive him."

"I hid his body and started to find you."

"I met a cowboy to-day when astray and he told me how to find you."

"I am a penniless fellow now, señor, but you will give me the reward."

"I will, upon my honor."

"Then write your draft on your bankers and come with me."

"Do not fear a trap, señor, for you can carry all your men if you wish."

"Make the draft payable to Ferdinand Janon."

After some consultation with Captain Yerger, Señor Samos sent for several of his herders to accompany them, and he and his guest set off under the guidance of the stranger.

It was just as he had said, a body was hidden away among the rocks, a mile from the old Mission, and it was at once identified as that of Marco Fuentes, still in his disguise as Red Raven the chief of the Redskin Road-Agents.

The man received his draft and at once rode away on the horse of the outlaw he had slain, while the body was taken to the Haunted Hacienda when both Carlos and El Cinto identified it beyond all doubt.

Then it was buried at the Haunted Hacienda, and as Señor Samos and his party rode away Carlos said:

"Now, El Cinto, we are owners here."

"Yes, Carlos, you are sole master of the Haunted Hacienda," was her reply.

As for the man who had made a small fortune by taking a life, he rode far before he halted, and then shaking his fist at the moon he said aloud:

"You saw me kill him, last night, night-orb, and to-night you saw me receive a fortune for my deed."

"Ay, and I get my revenge besides."

"Now I will try and live an honest life, if Mario the Merciless can do so; but oh! what a struggle it will be."

Then, with a bitter laugh he rode on his way, a wanderer about the wide world, a man believed to be at the bottom of the sea, yet alive.

It was a week before Captain Yerger could tear himself away from the Hacienda Samos, and when he did do so it was to visit it again and again, whenever he could get an excuse for running down the coast in search of smugglers.

Of course such visits could end but one way, and that was in a love affair, the finale of which was that Lulita Samos became the bride of the handsome sailor who had rescued her from the hands of the chief of the Redskin Road-Agents.

THE END.

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- 750 Violet Vane, the Vanquished, or, The Life Struggle.
- 763 Violet Vane's Vision; or, The Fiery Hand of Fate.
- 489 The Diamond Sport; or, The Double Face of Red Rock.
- 519 Captain Mystery; or, Five in One.
- 531 Daisy Dare, the Sport from Denver.
- 587 Old Bombshell, the Ranger Detective.
- 604 Iron Fern, the Man of Fire; or, Among the Vultures.
- 619 The Boy Tramp Detective; or, The Double Grip Witness.
- 641 Dismal Dave's Dandy Pard; or, The Clue to Capt. Claw.
- 651 Bound Boy Frank, the Young Amateur Detective.
- 682 Wild Vulcan, the Lone-Range Rider.
- 714 Old Misery, the Man from Missouri.
- 774 Clear-Grit Cal, the Never Say-Die Detective.
- 789 Sam Sheridan, the Secret Service Special.
- 806 Cowboy Steve, the Ranch Mascot.
- 820 Nobby Nat, the Tenderfoot Detective.
- 886 Sharper Stoke's Double Deal.
- 857 Spotter Bob in New York.
- 866 Spotter Bob's Bowery Racket.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

- 2 Yellowstone Jack; or, The Trapper.
- 48 Black John, the Road-Agent; or, The Outlaw's Retreat.
- 65 Hurricane Bill; or, Mustang Sam and His Pard.
- 119 Mustang Sam; or, The King of the Plains.
- 136 Night-Hawk Kit; or, The Daughter of the Ranch.
- 144 Dainty Lance, the Boy Sport.
- 151 Panther Paul; or, Dainty Lance to the Rescue.
- 160 The Black Giant; or, Dainty Lance in Jeopardy.
- 168 Deadly Dash; or, Fighting Fire with Fire.
- 184 The Boy Trappers; or, Dainty Lance on the War-Path.
- 203 The Boy Pards; or, Dainty Lance Unmasks.
- 211 Crooked Cal, the Calliban of Celestial City.
- 310 The Barranca Wolf; or, The Beautiful Deceit.
- 319 The Black Rider; or, The Horse-Thief's League.
- 355 Old Double Flat; or, The Strange Guide.
- 355 The King of the Woods; or, Daniel Boone's Last Trail.
- 449 Kit Fox, the Border Boy Detective.
- 625 Chinapin Dan, the Boy Trapper.
- 677 Chinapin Dan's Second Trail.
- 688 Chinapin Dan's Home Stretch.
- 698 Old Crazy, the Man Without a Head.
- 708 Light-Heart Lute's Legacy.
- 718 Light-Heart Lute's Last Trail.
- 723 Silverblade, the Shoshone.
- 729 Silverblade, the Half-Blood; or, The Border Beagle at Bay.
- 739 Silverblade, the Hostile; or, The Border Beagle's Trail.
- 748 Silverblade, the Friendly; or, The Border Beagle's Boy Pard.

BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER.

- 15 The Sea-Cat; or, The Witch of Darien.
- 29 The Dumb Page; or, The Dog's Daughter.
- 43 Dick Darling, the Pony Express Rider.
- 100 Lance and Lasso; or, The Children of the Chaco.
- 154 The Sword Hunter; or, The Land of the Elephant Riders.
- 159 The Lost Captain; or, Skipper Jabez Coffin's Cruise.
- 200 The Boy Bedouins; or, The Brothers of the Plumed Lance.
- 214 Wolfgang, the Robber of the Rhine.
- 249 Milo Romer, the Animal King; or, Round the World.
- 265 The Tiger Tamer; or, The League of the Jungle.
- 331 Black Nick, the Demon Rider.
- 395 California Joe's War Trail.

BY BUCKSKIN SAM (Major Sam. S. Hall.)

- 284 Old Rocky's "Boycast" or, Benito, the Horse-Breaker.
- 248 Giant George; or, The Ang'l of the Range.
- 275 Arizona Jack; or, Giant George's Pard.
- 297 The Tarantula of Taos; or, Giant George's Revenge.
- 307 The Strange Pard; or, Little Ben's Death Hunt.
- 318 Ker-whoop, Ker-whoop; or, The Tarantula of Taos.
- 327 Creeping Cat, the Cuddo; or, The Red and White Pards.
- 332 Frio Fred; or, The Tonkaway's Trust.
- 344 The Fighting Trio; or, Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway.
- 349 Wild Wolf; or, Big-Foot Wallace to the Front.
- 357 The Ranch Raiders; or, The Siege of Fort Purgatory.
- 364 Snap-Shot, the Boy Ranger.
- 375 Chiota, the Creek; or, The Three Thunderbolts.
- 381 Bandera Bill; or, Frio Frank to the Front.
- 392 Romeo and the Reds; or, The Besieged Ranch.
- 404 Little Larint; or, Pecos Pete's Big Rampage.
- 414 The Dalay from Denver.
- 427 The Three Trappers; or, Old Rocky on the Rampage.
- 443 Bluff Bill; or, The Lynx of the Leona.
- 455 Little Lone Start; or, The Belle of the Cibola.
- 684 Cache Carl, the Chico Giant.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
- 122 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.
- 126 Picayune Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
- 130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
- 142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
- 147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
- 152 Black Beas, Will Wildfire's Racer.
- 157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
- 162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
- 165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
- 174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
- 179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
- 183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
- 187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
- 189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
- 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
- 206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
- 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
- 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
- 225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dandy.
- 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
- 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
- 252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
- 262 The Young Sharpshooter; or, Rollieking Mike's Hot Trail.
- 274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
- 289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
- 298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
- 305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
- 324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
- 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
- 353 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
- 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
- 379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
- 403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
- 423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Henry.
- 488 Wild Dick Racket; or, How He Fought for Honor.
- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
- 566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
- 596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.
- 627 Tom Bruce of Arkansas; or, The Wolf in the Fold.
- 655 Plucky Paul, the Boy Speculator.
- 667 Bob and Sam, the Daisy Detectives.
- 709 The Curbstone Detective; or, Harry Hale's Big Beat.
- 757 Detective Frank's Sweep-stakes.
- 869 Ned Norman, the Gamble Broker.
- 881 Turkey Billy, the Shine-'em-up Detective.

BY J. W. OSBON.

- 469 The Rival Giants of Nowhere.
- 498 Cactus Burr, the Man from Hard Luck.
- 537 Old Buckeye, the Sierra Shadow.
- 564 Powder Phil, the Boy Miner, or, The Man Without a Past.
- 609 Bolly Borrit, the Veteran Detective.
- 620 Little Lightning's League; or, The Mystery of the Island.
- 638 Plucky Paul, the Boy Prospector.
- 751 Gold-Dust Dan, the Trail Patrol.
- 755 Gold Dust Dan's Oath; or, Keckless Roy, the Regulator.

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- 315 Ned, the Cabin Boy; or, The Witch of the Fort.
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- 413 Billy Bombshell, the Cliff Climber. By F. S. Winthrop.
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- 22 Deadwood Dick in Disguise; or, Buffalo Ben.
- 35 Deadwood Dick in His Castle.
- 42 Deadwood Dick's Bonanza; or, The Phantom Miner.
- 49 Deadwood Dick in Danger; or, Omaha Oil.
- 57 Deadwood Dick's Eagles; or, The Parade of Flood Bar.
- 75 Deadwood Dick on Deck; or, Calamity Jane, the Heroine.
- 177 Deadwood Dick's Last Act; or, Corduroy Charlie.
- 100 Deadwood Dick in Leadville.
- 104 Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Double Cross Sign.
- 109 Deadwood Dick as Detective.
- 129 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Gorgon's Gulch Ghost.
- 138 Deadwood Dick's Home Base; or, Blonds Bill.
- 149 Deadwood Dick's Big Strike; or, A Game of Gold.
- 156 Deadwood Dick of Deadwood; or, The Picked Party.
- 195 Deadwood Dick's Dream; or, The Rivals of the Road.
- 201 Deadwood Dick's Ward; or, The Black Hill's Jesabel.
- 205 Deadwood Dick's Doom; or, Calamity Jane's Adventure.
- 217 Deadwood Dick's Dead Deal.
- 221 Deadwood Dick's Death-Plant.
- 232 Gold-Dust Dick. A Romance of Roughs and Toughs.
- 263 Deadwood Dick's Divide; or, The Spirit of Swamp Lake.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Death Trail.
- 309 Deadwood Dick's Deal; or, The Gold Brick of Oregon.
- 321 Deadwood Dick's Dozen; or, The Fakir of Phantom Flats.
- 347 Deadwood Dick's Duenna; or, Days in the Diggings.
- 351 Deadwood Dick Sentenced; or, The Terrible Vendetta.
- 362 Deadwood Dick's Claim.
- 405 Deadwood Dick in Dead City.
- 410 Deadwood Dick's Diamonds.
- 421 Deadwood Dick in New York; or, A "Cute Case."
- 430 Deadwood Dick's Dust; or, The Chained Hand.
- 443 Deadwood Dick, Jr.; or, The Crimson Crescent Sign.
- 448 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defiance.
- 453 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Full Hand.
- 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Round-Up.
- 465 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Racket at Claim 10.
- 471 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Corral; or, Roseman Bill.
- 476 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dog Detective.
- 481 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Deadwood.
- 491 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Compact.
- 496 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Inheritance.
- 500 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Diggings.
- 508 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deliverance.
- 515 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Danger Ducks.
- 534 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr., the Wild West Video.
- 549 Deadwood Dick, Jr., on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Aloft.
- 582 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Nevada.
- 630 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in No Man's Land.
- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr., After the Queer.
- 642 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Buffalo.
- 648 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Chase Across the Continent.
- 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Among the Smugglers.
- 660 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Insurance Case.
- 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Back in the Mines.
- 672 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Durango; or, "Gathered In."
- 678 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Discovery; or, Found a Fortune.
- 684 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Bazzle.
- 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dollars.
- 695 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Danger Divide.
- 700 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Drop.
- 704 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Jack-Pot.
- 710 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in San Francisco.
- 716 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Still Hunt.
- 722 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dominoes.
- 728 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Disguise.
- 734 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Deal.
- 740 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deathwatch.
- 747 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Doublet.
- 752 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deathblow.
- 758 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Desperate Strife.
- 764 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Lone Hand.
- 770 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defeat.
- 776 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Resurrection.
- 782 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dark Days.
- 787 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Defted.
- 792 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Device.
- 797 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Desperate Venture.
- 802 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Diamond Dice.
- 807 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Royal Flush.
- 812 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Head-off.
- 816 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Rival.
- 822 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Boom.
- 828 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Scoop.
- 834 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Proxy.
- 840 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Clutch.
- 845 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, High Horse.
- 852 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Devil's Gulch.
- 858 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death-Hole Hustle.
- 863 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Bombshell.
- 870 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Mexico.
- 876 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decey Duck.
- 882 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Silver Pocket.
- 891 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dead-Sure Game.
- 898 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Drive.
- 904 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Trade-Mark.
- 910 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Tip-Top.
- 916 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double-Decker.
- 928 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Dollarville.
- 934 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Flush Flats.
- 940 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Shake-up.
- 946 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Drop.
- 951 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Right Bower.
- 957 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Ten-Strike.
- 965 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Gold-Dust.
- 971 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Oath.
- 977 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death-Doom.
- 986 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Best Card.
- 992 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Gold Dust.
- 998 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Play.
- 1005 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Branded.
- 1011 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dutch Pard.
- 1018 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Four.

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- 1086 Dandy Dick's Double.
- 1024 Dandy Dick, Detective.

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- 1041 Cowboy Chris to the Fore.
- 1052 Cowboy Chris the Man of Caliber.

Other Novels by E. L. Wheeler.

- 80 Rosebud Rob; or, Nugget Ned, the Knight.
- 84 Rosebud Rob on Hand; or, Idyl, the Girl Miner.
- 88 Rosebud Rob's Reappearance; or, Photograph Phil.
- 121 Rosebud Rob's Challenge; or, Cinnamon Chip.
- 277 Denver Doll, the Detective Queen; or, The Yankee's Surround.
- 281 Denver Doll's Victory; or, Skull and Crossbones.
- 285 Denver Doll's Decey; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
- 368 Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer; or, The Life Lottery.
- 373 Yreka Jim's Prize; or, The Wolves of Wake-Up.
- 385 Yreka Jim's Joker; or, The Rivals of Red Nose.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective; or, Dot Lettle Game.
- 213 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
- 244 Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret; or, A Sister's Devotion.
- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
- 253 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
- 384 Kangaroo Kit; or, The Mysterious Miner.
- 389 Kangaroo Kit's Racket; or, The Pride of Played-Out.
- 89 Death-Face, Detective; or, Life in New York.
- 96 Watch-Eye, the Detective; or, Arabs and Angels.
- 117 Gilt-Edged Dick, the Sport Detective.
- 145 Captain Ferret, the New York Detective.
- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
- 226 The Arab Detective; or, Snoozer, the Boy Sharp.
- 291 Turk the Boy Ferret.
- 325 Kelley, Hickey & Co., the Detectives of Philadelphia.
- 348 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Detective.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Slabside, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
- 484 Jim Benk and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 26 Cloven Hoof, the Buffalo Demon; or, The Border Vultures.
- 32 Bob Woolf; or, The Girl Dead-Shot.
- 45 Old Avalanche; or, Wild Edna, the Girl Ligand.
- 53 Jim Bludsoe, Jr., the Boy Phenix.
- 61 Buckhorn Billy; or, The Red Rifle Team.
- 92 Canada Chet; or, Old Anacoda in Sitting Bull's Camp.
- 115 Jack Hoyle, the Young Speculator.
- 125 Bonanza Bill, Miner; or, Madam Mystery, the Forger.
- 133 Boss Bob, the King of Bootblacks.
- 141 Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent; or, The Branded Browns.
- 177 Nobby Nick of Nevada; or, The Sierras Scamps.
- 181 Wild Frank, the Buckskin Bravo; or, Lady Lily's Love.
- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado; or, Rowdy Kate.
- 240 Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator; or, The Locked Valley.
- 273 Jumbo Joe, the Boy Patrol; or, The Rival Heirs.
- 330 Little Quick-Shot; or, The Dead Face of Daggersville.
- 358 First-Class Fred, the Gent from Gopher.
- 378 Nabob Ned; or, The Secret of Slab City.
- 382 Cool Kit, the King of Kids; or, A Villain's Vengeance.
- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher; or, A Son's Vengeance.
- 446 Sealskin Sam, the Sparkler; or, The Tribunal of Ten.
- 913 Kit Keith, the Revenue Spotter.
- 922 Sol Sharpe, the New York Night-Hawk.
- 943 Old Hayseed Among Bunco Men.
- 1001 Banty, the Denver Bootblack.

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- 490 Broadway Billy, the Bootblack Bravo.
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- 579 Broadway Billy's Surprise Party.
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- 669 Broadway Billy Abroad; or, The Bootblack in Frisco.
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- 687 Broadway Billy in Clover.
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- 735 Broadway Billy's Business.
- 738 Broadway Billy's Curious Case.
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- 762 Broadway Billy's Bargain; or, The Three Detective.
- 769 Broadway Billy, the Retriever Detective.
- 775 Broadway Billy's Shadow Chase.
- 783 Broadway Billy's Beagles; or, The Trio's Quest.
- 786 Broadway Billy's Team; or, The Combine's Big Pull.
- 790 Broadway Billy's Brigadier; or, The Dead Alive.
- 796 Broadway Billy's Queer Request.
- 800 Broadway Billy Baffled.
- 805 Broadway Billy's Signal Scoop.
- 810 Broadway Billy's Wipe Out.
- 815 Broadway Billy's Bank Racket.
- 821 Broadway Billy's Bluff.
- 826 Broadway Billy Among Jersey Thugs.
- 833 Broadway Billy's Raid.
- 839 Broadway Billy's Big Boom.
- 844 Broadway Billy's Big Bulge.
- 849 Broadway Billy's \$100,000 Snap.
- 856 Broadway Billy's Blind; or, The Bootblack Stowaway.
- 862 Broadway Billy in London.
- 868 Broadway Billy's Shadow London Slums.
- 874 Broadway Billy's French Game.
- 880 Broadway Billy and the Bomb-Throwers.
- 860 Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery; or, The Golden Keys.
- 869 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
- 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name.
- 424 Clibuta John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
- 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
- 467 Disco Dan, the Daisy Dude.
- 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
- 524 The Engineer Detective; or, Redlight Ralph's Resolve.
- 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
- 571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer; or, The Double Case.
- 592 The Boy Pinkerton; or, Running the Rascals Out.
- 615 Fighting Harry, the Chief of Chained Cyclone.
- 640 Bareback Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
- 647 Typewriter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
- 659 Moonlight Morgan, the "Finest" Man of Ante Bar.
- 887 Battery Bob, the Dock Detective.
- 894 Arizona Dick's Wipe-Out.
- 900 Jumping Jack's Jubilee.
- 906 Safety Sam, the Cycle Sport.
- 912 Train Boy Triet's Hot Hustle.
- 918 The Trump-Deck-Boy.
- 924 Big Boots Bob, the Fire-Ladder.
- 930 Rustler Ralph, the Boy Spotter.
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- 941 The Bowling Green Detective's Drop.
- 944 Cowboy Charlie's Double.
- 947 The Bowery Wrestler; or, The Butcher-Boy's Backer.
- 955 Paddy's Trump Card; or, Silver Sallie, the Girl Sport.
- 960 The Broadway Sport; or, Silver Fred's Clear Case.
- 967 \$1000 Reward; or, The Rival Reporters' Sleek Scoop.
- 978 Bantam Billy, the Corker-Ferret.
- 978 Plucky Pat, the Street-Boy Detective.
- 989 Bicycle Bob's Hot Scorch.
- 997 Scorching Sam, the Detective on Wheels.
- 1004 Scorching Sam's Sweep-Stakes.
- 1009 The Girl Cyclist's Winning Hand.

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- 1040 Buffalo Bill's Pony Patrol.
- 1015 Buffalo Bill's Texas Team.
- 1007 Buffalo Bill's Sure-Shots.
- 1006 Buffalo Bill's Decey Boys.
- 985 Buffalo Bill's Drop; or, Dead-Shot Ned, the Kans.
- 988 Buffalo Bill's Lasso Throwers.
- 981 Buffalo Bill's Fighting Five.
- 975 Buffalo Bill's Rifle Shots.
- 968 Buffalo Bill's Rush Ride; or, Sure-Shot, the High.
- 964 Buffalo Bill's Decey; or, The Arizona Crack Sho.
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